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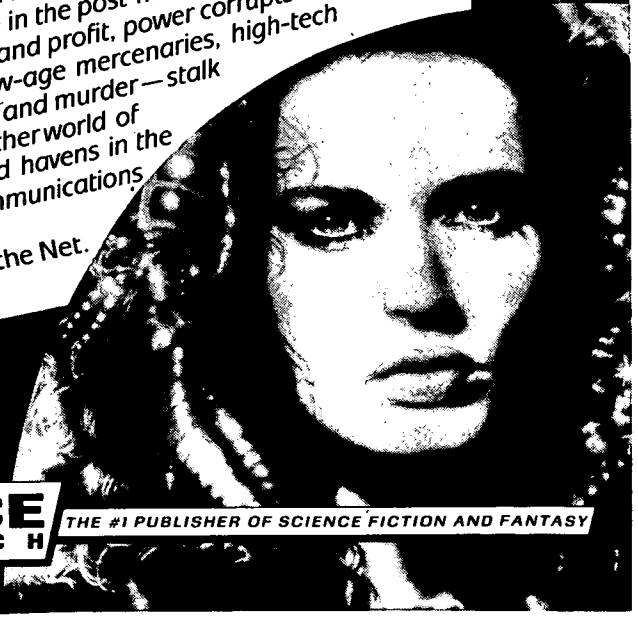

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

I am much given to optimism with respect to science and technology and, when giving a speech, I usually paint a rosy picture of the future, always provided that increasing knowledge is wisely used. (And I admit that it usually isn't.)

This does not always go well with my listeners. I remember once when in the question-and-answer session, a youngster rose and challenged my contention that technology had made human life better.

"Would you have been happier in ancient Greece?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, with the flat certainty of youth.

"As a slave?" I asked—and he sat down.

The trouble is that people remember "the good old days" (a phrase I view with marked contempt) with great selectivity. To them, ancient Greece means sitting around in the agora and chewing the fat with Socrates. Ancient Rome means sitting in the Senate and arguing points of law and policy with Cicero. They pay no attention to the fact that in both civilizations, these activities were engaged in by a thin layer of aristocrats, and that beneath that social level were a vast and seething morass of laborers, peasants, and slaves.

It is all very well to romanticize about medieval legends and dream of clanking out to war in shining mail, but some ninety-nine percent of the population "when knighthood was in flower" consisted of villeins and serfs who were also then in flower and who were treated worse than animals.

And I get so tired of pastoral idylls of nineteenth-century small-town America, when all one did, apparently, was sit on the porch and sip cider, except that when a financial panic hit there was absolutely no social responsibility for those who were struck down, and modern medicine, including antibiotics, did not exist so that infant mortality was high and life expectancy low.

I am also unimpressed by people who look about a vast mansion built in 1907 and sigh, "Gee, they don't build places like this any more. Look at the artisanry. Look at the detail." I lose patience with people who never stop admiring the good old days when workmen

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were proud of their work and turned out individual art—as compared with the modern day when cheap stuff is turned out in endless exact copies by soulless machines.

Let's face it. Do you know why beautiful mansions could be built in 1907? Because labor was cheap, so that you could afford to hire hordes of people to work on the mansion and hordes of servants to keep it going once it was built. And why was labor cheap? Because most people lived in a constant state of semi-starvation and misery. The fact that a few can have mansions is made possible by the fact that the multitudes had hovels.

Similarly, when artisans painstakingly turned out works of art, these works were few in number and only the thin layer of patricians (or business profiteers) could afford them. The general population made do with whatever they could hack out of wood and mud.

If mansions are very rare today because the multitudes live better, I'm glad. If beautiful art is less available so that the many can have something decent at a sub-art level, I'm all for it.

Does that sound as though I am that terrible thing, a "liberal" who worries about the welfare of the poor, instead of the yuppies? Well, yes, but that's not all there is to it. It's a very practical, self-seeking view, also.

My first wife once chafed over the fact that we couldn't find someone to come in once a week and do some chores for us. She said, "I

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wish we lived a hundred years ago when it was easy to get servants."

I said, "That would be terrible. *We'd* be the servants."

You see, I'm not descended from a long line of aristocrats, so I can't count on being one of the few who enjoys the great things of life. Nor do most of those who long for the good old days come of noble lineage, but I'm aware I don't, and they apparently are not.

And what has all this got to do with science fiction? I'll tell you—

When I started writing science fiction, it was the smallest and least-regarded branch of "pulp fiction," which was itself viewed as a sub-literary genre. That didn't bother me. I considered science fiction the noblest work of humanity and if others did not agree with me, so much the worse for them.

However, there were a number of science fiction writers and critics, especially in recent years, who chafed at this and who didn't want to be associated with anything as peasant-like as pulp fiction. They were natural aristocrats, I suppose, and they wished to be considered as great literary figures.

As a result, a legend arose and the legend goes like this. Once upon a time, science fiction was a respectable form of literature indulged in by all the great writers: by Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edward Everett Hale, James Fitz O'Brien, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and so on. Their work was part of the great mainstream of belles-lettres, and people went about saying, "Have you read the latest wonderful work of science fiction?"

Then along came a villain named Hugo Gernsback and founded a magazine that was devoted entirely to science fiction. He found a bunch of hacks who turned out terrible, unreadable, rotten stuff that all enlightened people scorned. After that, no decent writer would condescend to write science fiction; no decent well-educated person would condescend to read science fiction. And behold, science fiction became a "ghetto," a refuge for inferior writers, and when an occasional superior writer of science fiction tried to enter the enlightened and glorious mainstream, he was held back by the effluvium of the ghetto that clung to him.

Nuts!

Go back and read nineteenth-century science fiction, so-called. Most of it was gothic, horror, or fantasy. Yes, some of it was good (though not that much better than good twentieth-century science fiction, once you subtract the golden haze of the "good old days" psychosis), but the real point was that there was very little of it.

What Gernsback was trying to do was to produce science fiction for the multitude. Naturally, there were few people who were writing science fiction back in 1926, because so little of it was turned out that no great market had been developed for it. Gernsback started, therefore, by reprinting nineteenth-century science fiction. But

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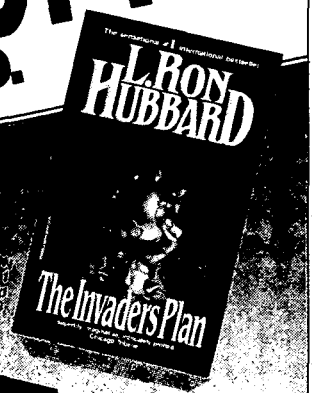

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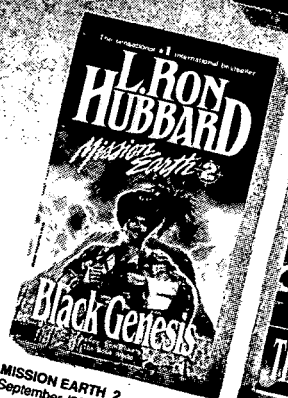

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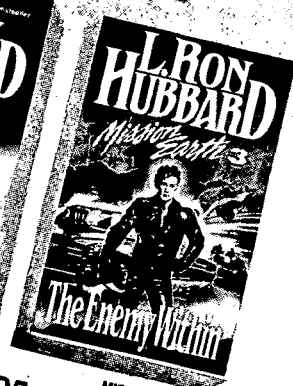

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since he had now created a market for science fiction, youngsters began to try their hand at it and, naturally, they weren't very good at first, but, with time, they got better!

Nowadays, we have science fiction writers who fancy themselves great literary figures and bemoan the fact that they are not living in the good old days when science fiction was part of the great mainstream, and that they must instead spend their lives trying to escape from the ghetto.

Why doesn't it occur to them that it was the writers who labored for the science fiction magazines, the despised ghetto, who, through decades of suffering through low payments and low esteem, slowly created a sizable market and a sizable regard in which *now* these literary figures can enjoy huge advances and large incomes?

It could not have been done at the nineteenth-century level. It could not have been done as long as science fiction was turned out only by a few for the few.

I suppose it may be because I stubbornly continue to consider myself one of the many and not one of the elite that I insist on identifying myself as a science fiction writer, even though I write in so many other fields that I can, with complete justification, call myself something else. (There are writers who write virtually nothing but science fiction, who nevertheless search for other labels so that they might think more highly of themselves.)

When Joel Davis suggested that I place my name on a science fiction magazine, I hesitated, but only because I felt I did not deserve the honor; that I might be accused (once again) of vanity and conceit; that other writers might refuse to write for a magazine under the umbrella of a name in no way better than their own. Once those doubts were put to rest, I had no further hesitation.

It never once occurred to me that by having a periodical that was named *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine,* I might be digging myself more firmly into the "ghetto," and that I would make it more difficult for myself to write in the many other fields in which I write.

And, as a matter of fact, it didn't. In half a century of professional writing, I was never rejected, never debarred from any field, just because I was a science fiction writer. Rather the reverse, I have often felt guilty over the fact that people judged me as better than I am, simply because I am a prominent and well-known science fiction writer.

That's my point, then. All this nonsense about a science fiction "ghetto" is just an offshoot of the "good old days" claptrap. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Dozois,

I have been subscribing to your brilliant magazine since the March '87 issue and buying it before that. I have never wished that I didn't read a yarn that I read—until now. Geoffrey A. Landis's "Vacuum States" (in July) was not worth my attention. The yarn was interestingly conceived and fairly well written, it was the plot that bombed. After I read it I felt like I was hanging in mid-air. The yarn didn't end, a serious literary flaw. If we want SF to become more respectable then we have to show the snobby critics that we know how to write literature and that we can be entertaining. I suppose we could live in slums and be considered "slick" or "pulp junk"—it's up to us. You, as the editor and editorial director, should try to keep this wonderful genre "literary." Don't publish unliterary works that slip by the author. Please?

Now I'll get less negative (phew!!!). "The Sky is an Open Highway" by Dave Wolverton was nice. Perhaps it wouldn't win, or even be nominated for an award, but it was still nice. One thing puzzles me about the yarn though, and it is very probably only me. You say in the bionote to Mr. Wolverton that he says "that 'The Sky is an Open Highway' is the first science fiction piece to which he ever set his hand," and that he assures you that it won't be his last. Weird. There was a novelette in *Writers of the Future Vol. 3* entitled "On My Way To Paradise" and it was by Dave Wolverton. This couldn't be a different person because *IAsfm's* Dave Wolverton has a novel out titled *On My Way to Paradise.* Was *On My Way to Paradise* a fantasy yarn (I haven't read it even though I own the book) so "The Sky is an Open Highway" is his first piece of science fiction? Please help me back to Earth.

Sincerely and slightly confusedly,

Matthew A. Cheney
Plymouth, NH

Remember that the order of publication is not necessarily the order of writing. I sold both the second and third stories I wrote, but the third story was published a year before the second story was.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov, Mr. Dozois, et al.,

Congratulations on a terrific issue! I refer to the absolutely stunning July '88 copy of your magazine, which is the third one I have received on this subscription.

I thought that "Fire Watch" by Connie Willis in a previous issue

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was extremely good. Her contribution this time, "The Last of the Winnebagos" was good, but somehow, not quite up to the extremely high standard of quality that she has set for herself. In general the two long stories in this issue were good, but what really blew me away was the very short and very powerful story by Geoffrey Landis, "Vacuum States." It reminded me strongly of some of the best of the Good Doctor's own writings.

The usual features (Dr. Asimov's editorial and the gaming column, and Baird Searles' book review column) were very good. Keep up the good work! I was particularly interested in hearing that Dr. Asimov has a new book of the Foundation series in print. I'm looking forward to reading it at least, if not actually owning it. I hope I can do both!

Is it true, the rumor that I've been hearing that Heinlein (Robert A., of course) is no longer alive? I certainly hope not, since he is one of my favorite authors. Please set me straight about this.

Sincerely,

Mike Simmons
Pineville, LA

Robert Heinlein's death is no rumor but, as you must know by now, a fact.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I was shocked and saddened when my literature teacher told me that Robert Heinlein had died. It's difficult to accept the fact that the Grand Master will never write again. I'm well aware that I am not the only science fiction fan who will miss his talent. Millions of others have read and enjoyed his masterpieces. I know I will never forget *Friday, Stranger in a Strange Land, The Cat Who Walks Through Walls,* or *Door Into Summer.* Many people will want to pay tribute to him. Would you like to make a bet on the amount of books published in the next year that will be dedicated to Robert Heinlein?

Sincerely,
Dawn Leemon

PS: I wish to compliment you on including "Last Contact" in your June 1988 issue. It is a haunting tale.

Lazarus Long may have been immortal, but Robert Heinlein wasn't, and he knew it. I've known him for some half a century and his health was more or less precarious for all that time. Let us be thankful he lived to reach his eightieth birthday.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Allow me to extend my condolences on your recent bereavement. First *Light Years* dies almost too rapidly to be noticed, and now *Nightfall* comes into the world crippled and near death. Such a double-barrelled tragedy is enough to keep anyone away from films. I hope you heed the lesson.

I will admit that the story of *Light Years* was not originally yours, but how did you get roped into doing the screenplay? I think the only reason it made any money (if only to reduce the loss a little)

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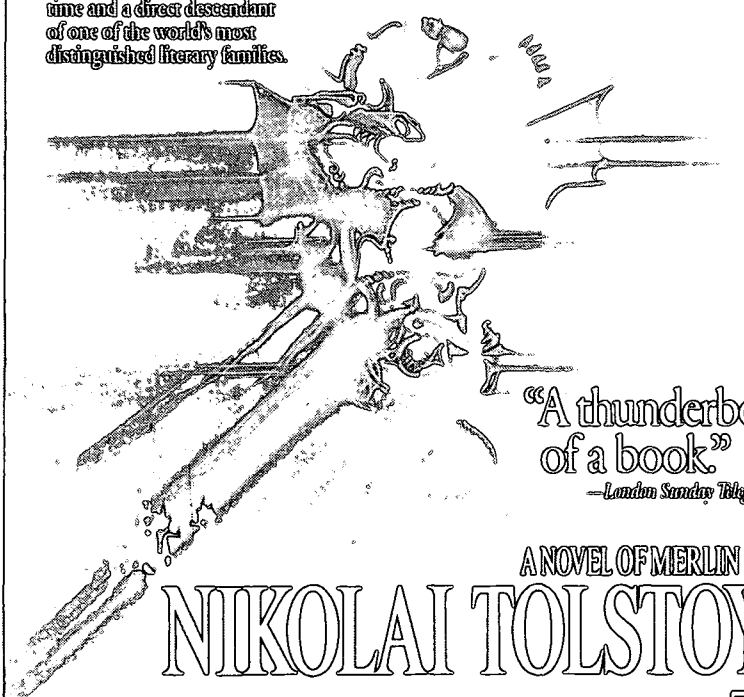

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was because your name was tacked onto it.

Nightfall, on the other hand, was your story from the start. The filmmakers kept two character names, some of the suns, the shelter, and the darkness at the end. What resulted does not deserve to be associated with you at all. I only hope you got some royalties out of it off the top, because it ain't gonna pay for itself.

There are some similarities between these movies: Both were ignored by the two major newspapers in the area (except for adverts). Both used your name for a bigger draw. Both were shown at the kind of theaters that can't or don't show the big-name films. I saw both with the same group of friends. Both films got me in trouble with those friends (because I'd suggested them). We saw them in the same theater. And both were miserable films. I think I'll stay away from that theater. There seems to be a jinx on it.

I hope you understand that I do not blame you for either debacle. You had little creative control over either project. It's a pity that *I, Robot* won't be made. It would make up for these—let's be charitable—things.

I don't know if this letter will be in time to warn you away from seeing *Nightfall.* One can only hope. Sincerely,

Fred Robinson
Southfield, MI

Well, that's life. I merely tinkered with the dialog in the case of Light Years *and I had no input at all where* Nightfall *was concerned. On the other hand, I was associated somewhat with the television show "Probe," which I liked a lot. So life in the fast lane isn't a total loss.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In the early 1950's, when I was a young boy growing up in wild, wild, rural Saskatchewan, I spyed a picture on a magazine in a drug store in Fort Qu'appelle. I remember the picture of a space ship on an icy world and the name Robert Silverberg in large letters. I bought the magazine and was mesmerized. I am happy to see that Mr. Silverberg is just as entertaining thirty-five years later.

It is easy to talk about the past. About things that happened a million years ago. But to contemplate our future—not the next few centuries—but hundreds of thousands and millions of years hence, that's something! All five billion of us will be dead, and totally forgotten as individuals. Nothing will remain of our civilization. It will be as if we never were.

After reading "Winter's End" I thought a lot about things like that. A blink of an eye in history, on a small planet, in an unoccupied region of space—one out of trillions upon trillions of planets, many of which probably contain life—yet humankind is so presumptuous it thinks that today is more important than anything and that its own philosophy is supreme in the universe.

How fortunate we are to have people amongst us like Robert Silverberg who, through the vehicle of his stories reminds us, not of the

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insignificance of life, but of the insignificance of Self.

Hugh Cargo
Regina, Saskatchewan
Canada

P.S. I was about to send this when I read that Bob Silverberg is fifty-one! That would make him about fourteen when I first saw him in print. If fifty-one is his correct age, then who the devil is it that I'm thinking about?

You mustn't think that a young fellow can't turn out publishable material. Robert Silverberg's first story to be published appeared in print when he was 18. My first story, on the other hand, appeared when I was an elderly dotard of 19.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois,

"The Last of the Winnebagos" by Connie Willis is easily the best story in July's magazine. Better than any in quite a while for that matter. It's terrific!

Nationwide guilt as a motive for allowing "the Society" to become so powerful and the abuses of that power becoming so flagrant are perfectly believable and only barely fiction. Willis handles satire as well as L. Ron Hubbard and as originally as Mark Twain.

"Vacuum States" was the only other story that appealed at all, the rest all seemed weak after reading the Willis story; it seems that mediocrity is more recognizable when you've started with excellence.

Two out of six is still pretty good though.

Lynda Harbac
Alabaster, AL

That's the danger of publishing a story that's too good; it makes the others seem less good. However, we fully intend to continue to search for the best stories we can find and take whatever risks go with it.

—Isaac Asimov

HANK JANKUS
1929-1988

We sadly note the passing of Hank Jankus, an artist whose fine illustrations have accompanied many of the tales appearing in these pages. After a long illness, Mr. Jankus died at home.

His first piece for *IAsfm*, was a warm and witty opening illo for Isaac Asimov's George and Azazel story, "The Evil Drink Does" (May 1983). Realizing he had captured the amusing spirit of the story perfectly, we proceeded to assign to Hank the art for every new Azazel tale. Hank contributed excellent interior illustrations for works by numerous other writers and he contributed a powerful cover for our February 1988 issue. Highly regarded in the field of science fiction illustration, his work also appeared in *Analog*, *Amazing*, *Fantasy Review*, and recently in a special issue of *Weird Tales*, whose cover and interior illos were entirely executed by Mr. Jankus. Hank also illustrated several books, and he was the owner of an advertising firm, Jankus & Associates, which he founded in 1960.

We have a few of his pieces in our inventory, but already this valued artist is sorely missed.

—Sheila Williams

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NEAT STUFF

by Matthew J. Costello

Starting with this issue of Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, *Matthew J. Costello's regular column, "Gaming," will change its name, and its focus. "Neat Stuff" will be a monthly review of the other worlds of SF, including computers and software, films and videos, audio tapes, comics and graphic novels, and, of course, gaming.*

Was there ever a television series as wonderfully prescient, iconoclastic and downright kooky as "The Prisoner"?

That granted, just what was it all about? And why now, twenty years after the show's premiere on American television, is there so much interest in this quirky exercise in paranoia that was oceans away from the doom and gloom of Orwell? Timing, as they say, is everything.

But first a bit of background for those unenlightened souls for whom Number Six is simply what comes after numero five.

In "The Prisoner," Patrick McGoohan essays a character whom we only know as Number Six. As the first episode opens, and each subsequent episode would show in abbreviated form, McGoohan drives his small Lotus 7 to a clandestine office, where he storms down a long, dark corridor and pulls open doors.

He enters the office and engages an older bureaucratic-looking superior in an argument we cannot hear. He then slaps down his resignation papers and leaves.

For fans of McGoohan's "Secret Agent" series it appeared that the agent had, in fact, resigned from his espionage career. But again, we are told nothing.

McGoohan's character returns to his flat and packs a bag. Meanwhile, a black hearse sidles up to his building and a tall, grim man walks up to the front door. Knockout gas is sprayed into the flat and McGoohan's character tumbles to the ground. When he comes to he is in The Village.

The Village is one of those remarkable creations that seem so much of their time but are also incredibly predictive of the future. McGoohan learns that the cheery, sunny village, with its cute shops and golf-cart taxis, is a prison. There are mountains to one side, and an ocean to the other. Everyone is saccharine to the extreme, very pleasant, and all dedicated to learning one thing. Why did he resign?

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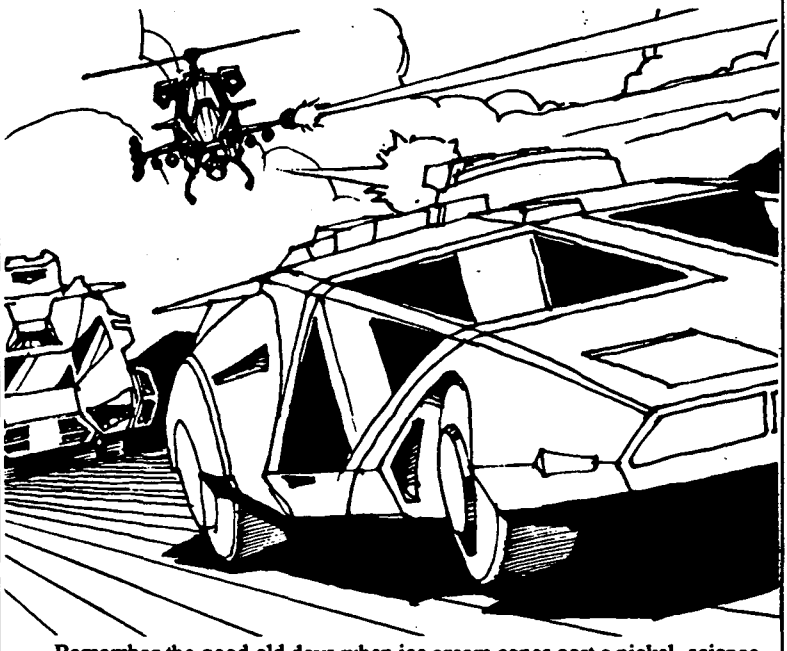

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But Number Six, as he's referred to, will not tell. "I will not be pushed, filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed or numbered. My life is my own." And this, kids, was in 1966.

Should he try to escape, an enormous balloon device called Rover is able to chase and cow him. Should he plan with a fellow conspirator to steal out of the Village in a helicopter, he will find the helicopter controled by Number Two, his persistent, yet even more paranoid nemesis. And, of course, all collaborators turn out to be working for the Village.

In one of the most brilliant episodes, *The Chimes of Big Ben,* Number Six seems to escape, sneaking all the way from the Village (apparently located on the Black Sea) back to London ... where his former co-workers ask him that same question: Why did you resign?

But when Big Ben chimes one hour too early, Number Six quickly finds the cord leading to the many tape recorders providing the ambient sounds of traffic and the Chimes themselves. Opening the window blinds, he finds himself back in the Village.

The series played with concepts of identity, privacy, corporate and governmental power and, ultimately, the idea of freedom. Number Six often repeated, "I am not a number, I am a free man," and "The Prisoner" explored the subtle ways that the Village, and any society, undermines that central idea.

A book could be written about "The Prisoner," and an indispensable one has arrived. It's called *The Official Prisoner Companion* (Warner Books, Inc.) and authors Matthew White and Jaffer Ali present a guide to all seventeen episodes, with comments on the meaning of certain events and symbols (like the pennyfarthing bicycle). The *Companion* comes with samples from the shooting scripts and stills from the production (which McGoohan oversaw as Executive Producer).

There's also a handy appendix listing the addresses of Six of One, the Prisoner Appreciation Society, and the Prisoner Shop, located in the Portmeiron Village Hotel. (Portmeiron is the real village used in the series.)

But if the key Prisoner phrases "Be Seeing You," and "Lovely Day," don't send a shiver down your spine, it's time you perhaps enjoyed the series, twenty years later. MPI Home Video (15825 Rob Roy Drive, Oak Forest, IL 60452) has released the entire oeuvre on videotape, including an alternate version of *The Chimes of Big Ben.* Image Entertainment (6311 Romaine St., Hollywood, CA 90038) is also bringing out the entire series on laser disc, which will allow Prisoner scholars easy access to key scenes.

Lastly, DC Comics is releasing a four-issue mini-series based on "The Prisoner," bringing the exploits of Number Six to the four-color world of the graphic novel.●

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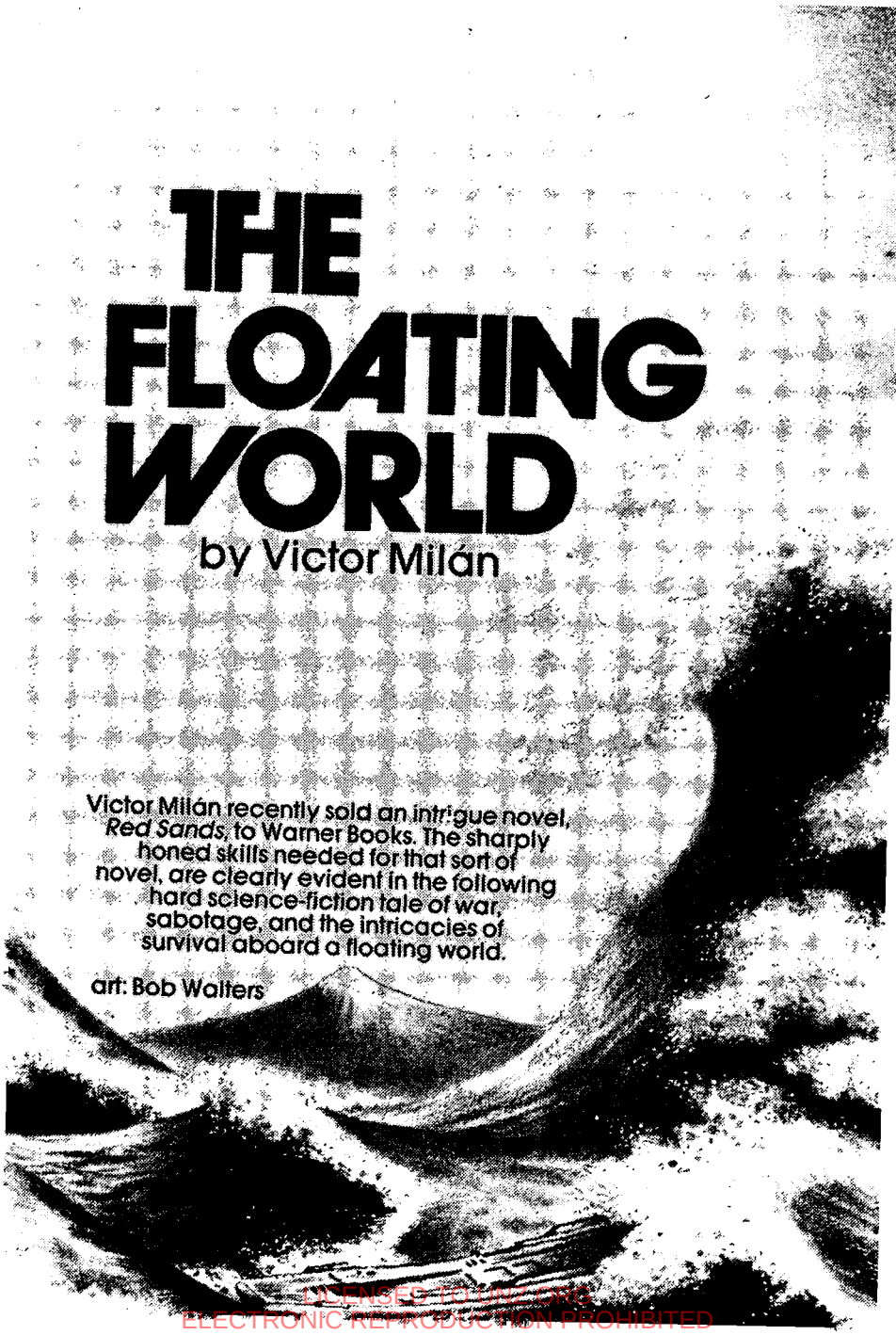
THE FLOATING WORLD

by Victor Milán

Victor Milán recently sold an intrigue novel, *Red Sands*, to Warner Books. The sharply honed skills needed for that sort of novel, are clearly evident in the following hard science-fiction tale of war, sabotage, and the intricacies of survival aboard a floating world.

art: Bob Walters



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The mountainside was stricken.

The limbs of the trees were stripped, twisted into mutant *bonsai* contortions or torn off clean. Patches of the trunks were charred; elsewhere they had a strange, slick, silver-dry appearance, as if the trees suffered some hideous dermal disease.

The blasted trees overlooked a scene of worse devastation. A huge crater had been gouged in the valley below. Ring-shaped mounds of black earth surrounded it, and its interior was mottled lumpy green, like inferior jade. No birds flew over it; no small animals prowled its perimeter.

On the mountainside, a fallen tree moved. Slowly, shedding earth and bits of ruined leaves, it tilted itself upright. The grey roots stirred, plunged into the earth.

On one branch a single bud appeared, pale green.

Others joined it, popping from the branches in startling profusion. They swelled, burst, unfurled into leaves like green flames, crisp and healthy.

For a moment the tree stood in among the skeletal forrest. Then the other trees limbs began to straighten, their roots to delve, their limbs to take green fire, until in moments the hillside was whole.

A figure sat on a boulder at the top of a clearing that overlooked the valley. It was female, though its thick black hair was pulled into a topknot and its dress was masculine: kimono beneath a plain black *hakama*. The face was wide but not quite round, the eyes long and narrow. The fingers that stroked the triangular chin were slender.

"Impressive," a voice said. It tried for gruff assurance, and barely escaped cracking instead.

The woman jumped to her feet. She was young, not long out of her teens if out of them at all. A strand of hair worked free and fell in her face.

"How did you get here?" she demanded.

The intruder stepped from the trees at the lower end of the clearing. He was dressed in a rich kimono ornamented with cranes in flight, his head was shaved to his own topknot, and he wore two swords thrust through his sash: the *dai-shō*. His face was narrower in structure than hers, though it showed a trace more baby fat. Otherwise it resembled hers closely.

He smiled. "I have my resources. While you contemplate, I act . . . sister."

"You're intruding," she said, turning from him.

"I intended to." He gestured toward the crater, now half obscured by leafy limbs. "Why didn't you restore that, too, as you did Takara-yama?"

"I wish to meditate upon the meaning of that crater. And I have no desire to defile our father's memory, HIDETADA-san."

"The meaning of the crater is that our father failed to act with sufficient

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resolve. We honor his memory by heeding his final message, and refusing to repeat his error."

She gestured at his swords. "You presume to the appurtenances of a samurai in service."

"I could say, my sister, that we were created of the *buke,* the martial caste. Likewise I could say that I do serve, in the larger sense. I serve the people of Japan. I mean to serve all humanity."

"By forcing them to your will?"

"Listen to me, MUSASHI-san," he said, and his earlier arrogance had been replaced by earnestness, almost childlike in its intensity. "We have abilities beyond those of any human. We have *power.* Is it not our responsibility to use that power to lead the world back from the edge of self-destruction, to lead it back to order?"

She sat once more upon the rock and rested hands on her knees. "If we exercise our power that way, HIDETADA-san, we will become what we struggle against. We will destroy what we would preserve."

His face went dark. "Weakness! Such sentimentality forced our father to destroy himself."

"You speak of honoring our father's memory. Yet it is you who dishonor him, by refusing to heed the meaning of his final gift."

"We must not be rivals."

"I have no wish to be your rival."

"Then you must join me."

"I cannot."

He drew his *katana,* raised it with both hands. "I regret this, but *giri* overcomes *ninjō.* You should not have come here unarmed, my sister."

A stone detached itself from the outcrop and whirred toward his face. He parried. His blade snapped clean. The end fell to the ground like a watered-steel leaf.

"And stone blunts scissors," the girl said. "You should not have forgotten that this is *my* glade, brother."

And the grass twined around his sandaled feet, his split-toed blue *tabi* with circular designs worked in them. And the limbs of the trees reached for him as he snatched for the hilt of his *wakizashi,* twined like giant parasite vines around his limbs, trapping him. Still he struggled, crying out in fury and frustration, as the wind whirled up from the valley and small stones pelted him like hail.

His sister laughed, her hair eroding from the knot and whipping in the wind. The grasping treelimbs tightened, *twisted.* At the last moment before they would break him the samurai youth gave a final despairing cry and all the substance went out of him. He dissolved into bright dust, and dissipated on the wind like a handful of powdered jewels.

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The wind died. The grass retreated to the ground. The branches resumed their earlier placid shape.

The young woman's laughter had likewise died. On her face now lay a sadness that foresaw no end.

At fifteen twenty-three the Fukuoka Island Pelagic Launch Facility went offline. Dataflow to the satellite called the Floating World was not interrupted.

"The shuttle is to lift from Fukuoka in a few minutes, MUSASHI-sama," Dr. Nagaoka Hiroshi said, kneeling on the *tatami* mat that covered the deck within his *shoin*. It was a six-mat room, about standard for living quarters within the habitat torus. What was unusual was that he was the sole occupant. In the straight-line hierarchy that was Japanese society, rank had metered privileges. Besides which, no one would share quarters with him anyway. "As you know, our agents encountered some difficulty at the clinic; there was rioting in Shinjuku. But all should go smoothly now."

"I wish you wouldn't *sama* me, Nagaoka-san," the voice said from the cee-squared unit. To one side, painted rice paper *fusuma* screens hid the bulkheads. On the other metal fairing, a third of a meter deep and a meter high, had been welded to bulkheads now hidden by plain screens to form the *tokonoma* alcove, in which hung Nagaoka's personal treasure, an ancient woodblock print. "How can I be superior to you? I'm not even alive."

It was the voice of a woman in her twenties. It used the masculine speech, as was fashionable among modern Japanese women—or at least had been before the Fourth World War two weeks before; fashions were shifting. Seriousness didn't seem to suit the voice.

Nagaoka fiddled with his dense hornrim glasses, which was his habit in moments of uncertainty. "You are superior to me in every sense," he said, choosing his words so carefully his usual stammer was barely evident. *How curious,* he thought. *Our language—our entire culture—is predicated on avoiding precisely such uncertainty. Yet, surely, our traditions never evolved to cover such a situation.* He was an anthropologist by profession, which colored his frequent bouts with introspection.

The voice sighed. *How marvelous,* Nagaoka thought, *in that she never breathes. Does she affect a sigh to reassure me, by seeming more human? Is it willed, or a subroutine she's implanted in herself?* MUSASHI was a constant wonder to him, the more so since he had helped bring her—never *it*—to life.

"Please," the wall speaker said. "I don't wish to be treated in such a way."

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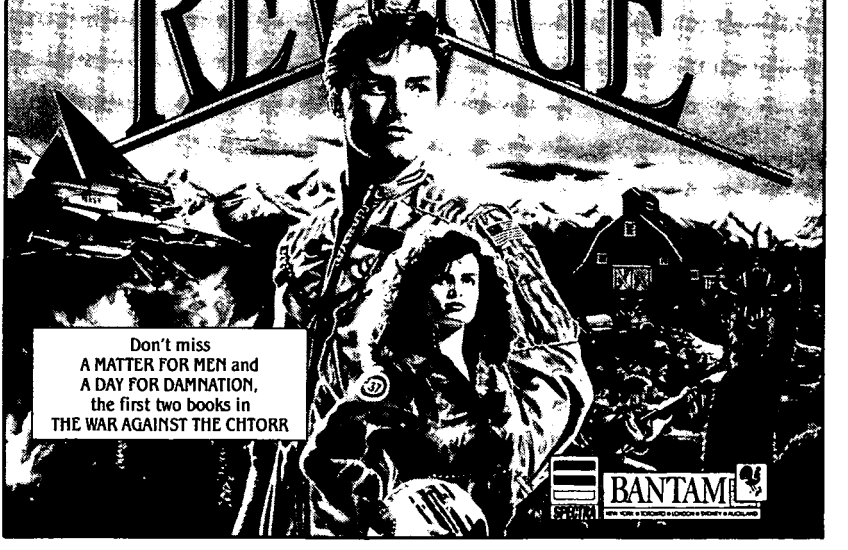

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Delicious paradox! The conflict of obligations—Nagaoka was about to address himself to the issue when the door chimed discreetly for attention with three simulated notes of a *shamisen.*

"Enter, " Nagaoka said. It occurred to him, not for the first time, that the fifth generation subroutine that worked the door and which he addressed so brusquely was, like all the programs that monitored the satellite and kept it alive in its steeply tilted orbit, a part of MUSASHI. Yet they were not her. Mindless servants, no more.

The door slid open. One of the techs stood there. She performed a perfunctory bow. "Katsuda says to tell you we've heard from Fukuoka. The launch has been delayed briefly. Some technical problem. It should be taken care of soon."

Her tone was barely polite, and Nagaoka noticed that her silver coveralls were rumpled, soiled around the neck and spotted on the front. Coriolis current carried a whiff of her to him; she wasn't clean. Nonetheless, Nagaoka nodded. "Thank you, Tomita. Tell Katsuda-san I understand."

The woman bobbed her close-cropped head and withdrew; the door slid shut.

"Our chief technician says there has been a delay, MUSASHI-sama," Nagaoka said, turning back to the wall unit, as though MUSASHI would not have heard the exchange. Of course, MUSASHI already knew what *Ukiyo's* chief technician had sent his subordinate to tell Nagaoka; she monitored all traffic flow in and out of the satellite, except private correspondence. But she permitted the human occupants of the station their rituals. "I take full responsibility."

"Oh, Nagaoka-*kun,* how can you take responsibility for something you had nothing to do with?" she asked. She was exasperated now, using the affectionate-diminutive suffix to cajole him, as if she were a child—or a teacher speaking to a favored male pupil.

Nagaoka bowed low, head to tatami. MUSASHI had violated formula, but no formula truly covered this. "I feel shame, nonetheless, " he said, feeling a guilty thrill.

A squelch of static emerged from the speaker, MUSASHI's pet mode of expressing exasperation. It fascinated Nagaoka, who'd heard it before: it was analogous to a human gesture, but apparently evolved independently, not in direct emulation of MUSASHI's creators as her sighs had been.

"I shall leave you, Nagaoka-san," she said, and withdrew.

He raised his upper body from the mat and gazed at the blank screen. *How curious,* he thought. *I always have the palpable impression of a presence having left the compartment.* Of course, she was still there in a sense, as she was everywhere in the station at once. Yet her conscious-

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ness was focused elsewhere, and she would not become aware of him directly unless he spoke to her—and then a *shosei* subroutine would attract her attention, as it would Dr. Shimada's or Katsuda's if he wished to speak with them.

"*Shosei,*" he said, addressing the Gen-5 personal secretary resident in the *Ukiyo*'s computers, "give me a view of Earth."

What appeared to be a blankness of rice-paper *fusuma* screen darkened into an image of a white-mottled circle drawn on blackness. He squinted behind the thick lenses of his glasses, reflexively seeking the Home Islands through the clouds, then realized *Ukiyo*'s steeply-tilted orbit had carried her over the southern hemisphere.

It is the season of storms, he told himself, vaguely feeling it was a quote, irritated at his inability to fix its origin in his mind. He frequently irritated himself, and wished he were someone else, someone whose nature was more effectual.

The true season of storms had passed, of course; Nagaoka had spent WWIV watching displays from orbital vid pickups in sick fascination as thermonuclear pinpoints flared, expanded, diffused, and vanished on the planet below. After the fact he didn't seem all that affected. He felt somehow divorced from earth. The upsets of War Three, the years of compulsive labor on the TOKUGAWA project, the white-hot exhilaration of its success, his exile to the Floating World, had used up his surplus emotion. *Ukiyo* was all the world that was real to him now. It shamed him that he didn't feel the destruction of more than half of what population War Three had left more keenly. But it seemed to him that everybody he knew was already dead by the Fourth World War.

He turned to the *tokonoma.* The print within eased his spirit, as the contents of the treasure-alcoves were supposed to do. A memento of a moment, summoning nostalgia for a scene he'd never witnessed: Hokusai's *Beneath the Waves off Kanagawa,* perhaps the most famous of Japanese artworks. It was an original, presented by old Yoshimitsu Akaji to the team headed by Dr. Elizabeth O'Neill, a gesture whose munificence had been almost as unprecedented as the success it commemorated. In one of the few acts approaching rebellion Nagaoka had performed since choosing his career in defiance of his father, who sent him to *Tōdai* to be groomed as a New Mandarin, he had smuggled it along when Akaji's doomed son Shigeo banished him to the Floating World.

He withdrew inkstone and brushes from beneath Hokusai's famous fractal wave, and composed himself to write.

The Net was a reef.

A vast chaotic sprawl, amorphous yet possessing order. A polychrome lattice of information, an infinity of shadowed cells whose depths hid

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wonders. Kelp-strands of data anchored in its structure waved fractal fronds among multiplex dimensions. The denizens of the reef were many, bright, and strange.

Like a happy moray MUSASHI slid among machicolations of *Montastrea,* brushed the fringes of a gorgonian fan, savoring the great reef's beauty with senses no human could share, not without direct interface to the data-construct which was MUSASHI's own self. MUSASHI could perceive selectively, like a human closing her eyes to concentrate on sound or smell, or like X-ray lasers focusing progressively on deeper layers of a crystal lattice, perceiving and capturing it a holographic slice at a time. While she was occupied the quotidian work of keeping the Floating World alive and functional was handled by Fifth Generation routines whose most sophisticated capability was to recognize a situation they couldn't handle, and alert MUSASHI that her conscious attention was required.

She had begun her swim as she often did, assimilating the entire physical matrix of the data-reef as a *gestalt,* from millions of notebook computers hooked into the Net via milliwatt transmitters to the geosynch belt studded with communications sats. She could focus her attention on any single quantum of the physical structure, from a Brazilian secret policeman's desktop in Buenos Aires to a communications platform hanging eternally above the Indian Ocean, aloof from the warfare that still raged below.

For the first bracing instants she was content to take in the whole, to *feel* it, like a human diver running her hand over the spiky coral of the reef, but with no fear of toxins or being cut. There was nothing in this reef she had to fear. It was her born environment.

She dove deep, immersing herself in currents of information that flowed around her, cool and sensuous as Caribbean water. For a time she simply experienced and enjoyed.

As the first simple tactile rush of pleasure subsided she came aware to a growing sense of wrongness. The current had a strange taint, abysses gaped in the reef's convolute structure; her sensory reach was constrained by murky roils like seabed silt-storms.

It was no surprise, but it was disappointment.

The data plane had not escaped the Fourth World War. Widespread destruction of the physical matrix had torn analogue gaps in the great reef. But analogy with a real-world ecostystem was accurate: the data environment was self-healing, could absorb and rectify damage. To an extent.

Her father had been born between the wars—she thought of his creation that way, as birth, as he had, as she thought of her own—but as tension in the Pacific wound closer to a new war he had studied the

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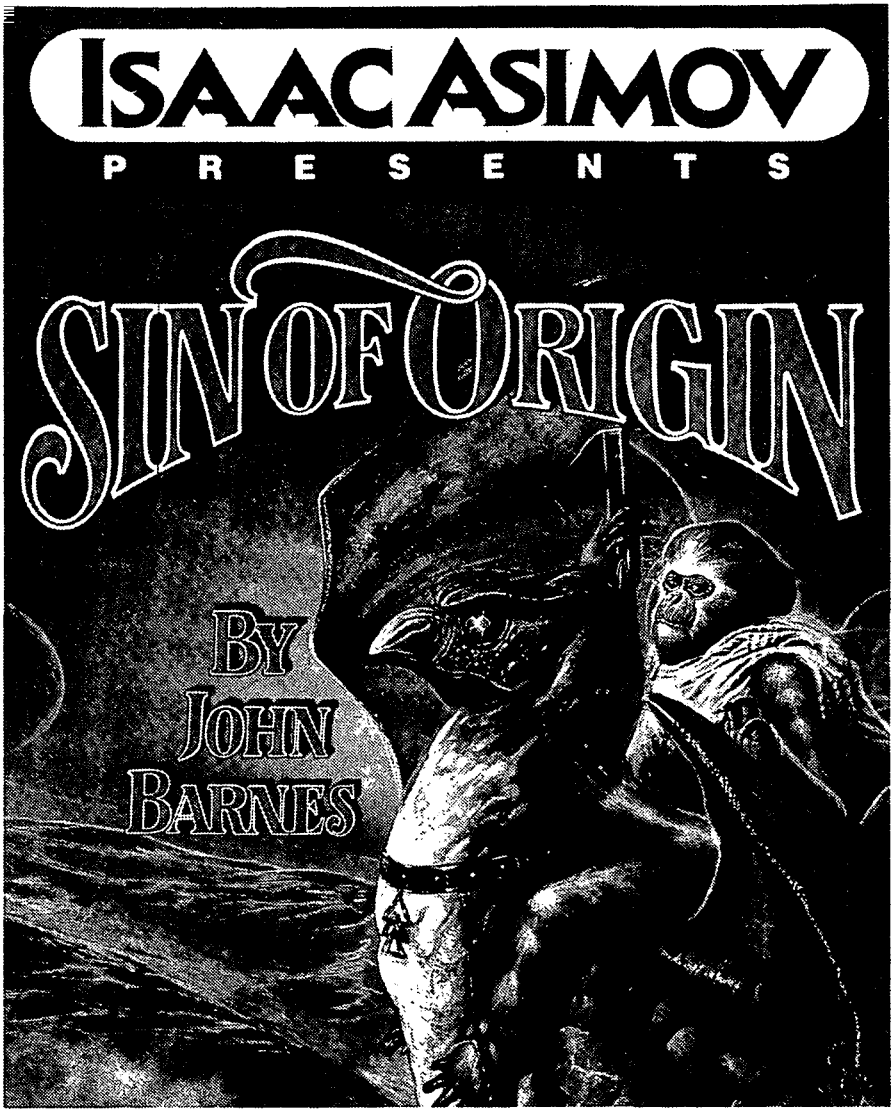

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effects of the Third World War on the dataplane. He had concluded that it grew back stronger than before, after a period of dislocation.

So MUSASHI averted her senses from the devastation. Surely, the damage would heal itself.

Wouldn't it?

"Mr. Director."

Nagaoka glanced up, reflexively laying his chopsticks down next to his bowl so that the Coriolis pull of the station's rapid rotation wouldn't make them roll away.

Not just a commissary, the five by seven meter *kotatsu* was a refuge from the isolation imposed by the vacuum outside—from the necessary division of the station into airtight compartments, so alien to the Japanese way of life. The Japanese inboard gravitated here whenever possible, drawn by one another. A handful of technicians and scientists occupied the compartment, conversing or watching a newscast on the two-meter *fusuma* TV about civil war in what War Four had left of Indonesia, who had been one of the principal players in that round of eliminations. None was quite so rude as to stare openly—morale hadn't slipped so far yet—but Nagaoka felt their sidelong scrutiny like shafts of sunlight darting through leaves.

"What can I do for you?" Nagaoka said as evenly as he could. He could feel his pulse spiking as if he had an oscilloscope in his chest. He had knelt before the compartment's *tokonoma* and its particular treasure for his meal, assuming the ritually dominant location because he knew it was his duty; it always made his belly churn. He was constantly aware of the sidewise glances. They brushed his skin like white-hot wire.

"It's the *gaijin* scientist," Katsuda said. He had a face like a block and exaggerated eyebrows, and his hair seemed drawn in short, angry brushstrokes. His body was solid, well-developed about the *hara*—the belly—denoting old-style Japanese strength. The competence he projected intimidated Nagaoka almost as much as his truculence. His chief assistant, Tomoyama, stood behind his left shoulder and glared at Nagaoka with undisguised contempt. "He insists that we evacuate Chamber 30."

"Is this a problem?" Because some experiments required vacuum but not null-grav, every compartment of the satellite was designed to have its atmosphere blown on command, after AI safeguards determined there were no unprotected humans present. Though every member of *Ukiyo's* complement, Nagaoka included, had been selected because he or she displayed an ability to endure the rate of rotation necessary to maintain one gee, the transition between the relatively high three RPM of the

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habitat wheel and the null-gee lab's none was a strain. Practice was to avoid making it whenever possible.

His attention kept trying to stray to the television, which was now showing the relocation of a Ukrainian village by something called the New Red Army, which was tearing at the fringes of the Russian Federated Christian Socialist Republic. A heavily armed spokesman was saying the village was being "peacefully reformed. " The correspondent didn't seem inclined to contradict him, as the sad peasants tramped through lead-sky drizzle under the reformers' guns.

"The world is coming apart below us," Tomoyama snapped, knife-handing the air in the screen's direction. "This is our world up here now, this is our *uchi*. How long must we debase ourselves by playing servant to *tanin*?"

Nagaoka felt his eyelids lower like automated shutters. The word Tomoyama used meant strangers, outsiders, and it didn't have a pleasant connotation. Nagaoka didn't have to be an anthropologist to read his *haragei,* his belly talk, which could mean either multiple meanings or body language. If he had just meant the American expatriate Thoma, he would have used the word for foreigner: *gaijin.*

I'm still an outsider here, he thought. After months among them. It was his lack of technical background, his training in what Katsuda and his people thought of as a soft science, as much as the fact that he was by their standards a late arrival that made them scorn him.

He moistened his underlip and fixed his glasses firmly on his nose. "Have you lost all *aisha seishin,* Tomoyama-san? We will do what loyalty demands—unless we have no thought for anything but ourselves."

The skin on Tomoyama's narrow face tightened as if it were being wound on a spool at the back of his skull. Nagaoka hated himself for pulling strings in such a clumsy way, invoking "company warrior spirit." But trite as it was, it was an approach difficult for most Japanese to counter.

Difficult but not impossible. Tomoyama's eyes glittered like glass bearings. Next time he might not be so readily manipulated.

"We must remain loyal or we're no better than *gaijin,* always scurrying around in pursuit of their own interests," grunted Katsuda. "But it will be inconvenient. We've been using 30 for storage."

"I am sure you will easily find a solution, Katsuda-san."

Katsuda turned and stumped out with Tomoyama skittering at his heels.

Shortly Nagaoka found, not really to his surprise, that he had the *kotatsu* and the television to himself. *I am isolated,* he thought.

But they were *all* isolated. Exiles. The station's rotation prevented the physical deterioration associated with weightlessness; physiology wouldn't

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bar their return to Earth. But many of the staff had lost homes and family in the War—or worse, didn't know, like poor Omamura, who Dr. Shimada had on tranquilizers. The rest wondered just how long there would remain anything to return to. And there was something more, something he felt keenly himself: a growing sense of alienation from the turbulent planet below.

We approach the crisis, he thought. It had been developing since his arrival; the Fourth World War had been the catalyst, though *Ukiyo* had ridden untouched above the thermonuclear storm clouds. Now it was about to break.

Whatever shall I do?

As she often did, MUSASHI made her final stop before surfacing the Floating World itself. Focusing her consciousness on one of the vid pick-ups mounted on the hectare of controllable solar array that floated near the satellite, she admired the artificial moon that was functionally her home.

Given the Japanese propensity for putting aesthetics above everything, it was a jarring sight for outsiders: an irregular torus that rotated around a hub to which was attached the smooth spray-bottle shape of a discarded American shuttle booster, giving the impression of a scabby hundred-meter mushroom. The satellite's construction had been a collaboration between YTC and a bioengineering firm called Amagumo. As befit its soya noodle budget it began existence as a simple dumbbell, two seven-meter long cylindrical modules connected by a strut rotating three times a minute.

Over the years more modules had been added, as workload demanded and budget allowed, until the circle was closed. Because space exploration wasn't cheap and Akaji-sama was, the expansion was generally of an ad hoc nature, dependent on what prefab modules were available for launch or what kind of space junk orbited not much delta-vee distant from *Ukiyo's* low forty-five degree orbit and could economically be reclaimed. That accounted for its irregular appearance.

From her vantage point on the faerie-framework of the solar collectors MUSASHI admired the way sunlight shining past the blue limb of Earth danced on the ring's uneven surface as it turned. When seen with the Japanese heart, less obsessed with geometric regularity than the Western, the shantytown appearance *Ukiyo* presented in contrast to the plastic smoothness of toruses built as such from the outset had its own organic beauty.

With something like a sigh she gathered herself and plunged back into herself.

* * *

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Climbing down to the Center of the World, Nagaoka Hiroshi experienced the faintly queasy sensation of growing lighter with every rung. There was a lift in the other pressurized shaft across the hub, and conveyers for bigger objects on the two openwork braces perpendicular to the enclosed spokes, but it was YTC policy to climb whenever possible, in the interests of health. Nagaoka was Westernized enough to feel vaguely ridiculous at such petty-reg punctilio just weeks after the world had blown up for the second time in less than a decade. But he climbed down the white plastic reed; you couldn't get too much exercise in space, even under artificial gee.

Besides, he thought, *perhaps ritual is all that's holding us together now.*

At least there'd been some good news. The shuttle had finally lifted from the water off Fukuoka.

The Floating World's center was a disk ten meters across and five thick, impaled by but never touching the five-meter thick shaft affixed to the tapered end of the null-gee lab. The magnetic plastic soles of Nagaoka's slippers held him in place in the much reduced pseudogravity as he opened a curved Lexan door and climbed "up" into the Torque Converter. He worked the controls, felt the padded bulkhead of the small chamber press briefly against his back as the converter, suspended like the shaft itself on frictionless hot-superconductor maglev bearings, magnetically clutched in and decelerated to match the lab.

A green light glowed by his elbow. He pushed the release bar, heard the soft unsealing kiss as another Lexan panel slid open. Without bothering to affix his safety line—like most Japanese he knew when not to obey the letter of the rules—he gave himself a gentle push and drifted into the heart of the Floating World.

The null-gee lab was a salvaged American shuttle booster, an expendable carried all the way to orbit instead of being dropped and allowed to burn in; the Americans had intended to use it as a module in an SDI station that was never built. Fortuitously, it circled in an orbit convenient to *Ukiyo,* and shortly after the Third World War YTC and Amagumo had reclaimed it. The PanEuropeans brought suit in the World Court on behalf of the American government-in-exile in Paris, but the Hague court found that the Japanese *zaibatsu* had exercised legitimate right of salvage. PanEurope responded by dissolving the Court, but was powerless to do more. The American government-in-exile continued to rant about expropriation, but faded into insignificance even before EuroFront captured Paris the first time. YTC and its temporary partners ignored the *gaijin* noise and happily upgraded their satellite.

A pleasant sense of disorientation struck Nagaoka on a wave of warm green smell. It appeared he had emerged into jungle, not a lab in orbit

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three hundred kilometers above Earth's surface. Fronds and giant leaves stretched toward him from all directions, fibrillating gently in a humid breeze.

He savored the illusion for a moment, then let it go. He clapped his hands politely, announcing his presence, then reached for a green-painted bungee that almost mimicked a liana and propelled himself forward. He passed oddments of lab equipment interspersed with the flats where the foliage, gene-tailored to thrive in null-gee, twined roots deep in the mesh of porous polymer capillaries through which they drew nourishment.

Green Lab seemed unoccupied. He used another bungee to arrest himself at the far bulkhead, pressed a panel. A hatch slid open, and he pulled through into Blue Lab.

Blue Lab presented a more conventional appearance: blocklike apparatus arrayed around the cylindrical interior, which was crisscrossed with bungees and painted placid pastel blue in the sort of overt ergonomicizing that always irritated Nagaoka. Beyond, past suit lockers and an airlock, lay the White Lab, which maintained permanent vacuum for those experiments which required it as well as null-gee.

Inja-san was here, for once, floating next to a low gleaming coffin of device that folded proteins like origami. He wore a powder-blue one-piece over his usual loincloth, out of deference to lab protocol, but his feet were bare. He held a bungee between the toes of one foot, anchoring himself.

He glanced over at Nagaoka. "Nagaoka-san. Good to see you. I was afraid it might be that cretin Katsuda."

They were skewed, so that Inja-san was "above" Nagaoka, who had to crank his neck back to look at him. Nagaoka reoriented himself and sculled forward with light touches on the flexible strands. "I came to see how the experiments were progressing."

The old man shrugged. "We're just pretending; haven't done any real science since the War. We're just marking time till the fools down below tell us what they need. If they ever do. Time may be coming when they just forget us for all their problems." He nodded judiciously. "That might be best, come to think of it. Did the shuttle come?"

As he asked the question he turned to look at Nagaoka. The anthropologist felt his stomach loop. Inja-san never left weightlessness, didn't even wear an electropak to prevent calcium loss from his bones. He had the bloated face of a null-gee dweller: *fugu*.

His body fluids had redistributed themselves, migrating upward from his legs and lower body, expanding his chest, puffing out his face, making his eyes sink deeper in their sockets, making his eyelids swell. It was said space turned even *gaijin* Asian; it made Inja-san's face a mask of oriental menace, a Yellow Peril parody like something from World War

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II or pre-War Three America. Mostly the swollen cheeks and pooched-out lips gave him a resemblance to the Japanese puffer fish.

Despite his Japanese aversion to physical deformity Nagaoka made himself face the technician without flinching. Inja-san was the closest thing he had to a human friend in the station.

"The shuttle is delayed, Inja-san."

"Ah. I hear there's going to be a big scientist on board, maybe someone with some science for us to do." He grinned abruptly. His teeth were bad, and consequently he delighted in showing them. "And whiskey. Good whiskey, Old Rebellion from EasyCo, not that Suntory cat-piss. Enjoy it while I can, that's what I'll do. Lots of EasyCo isn't there any more; who knows if they'll still make whiskey?"

"All human societies have made some sort of alcohol for consumption," Nagaoka said, slipping into pedant mode and then feeling like a fool for it. He had never really known how to talk to people.

"Well, then, maybe they won't share it with us, eh?" Inja-san laughed shrilly and tapped Nagaoka on the arm. "So you came down here to see what I'm doing? Not as if you'd understand."

Nagaoka lowered his eyes. "You're right, Inja-san. I have little understanding of what you do here." Self pity bubbled up from the middle of him and threatened to seep out his eyes. "No wonder everyone resents me. I don't know anything practical."

"I'm just having a joke. Indulge me; I'm old, even if I am going to live forever." He turned back to the apparatus. "That's what I like about you. Katsuda thinks he knows everything and doesn't know much. You don't think you know anything, but you do."

"I've tried to come to terms with the technical aspects—"

"Oh, save it for the board meetings, if there ever are any now that the last of the Yoshimitsu are gone. You'll never be a technologist. So what? Leave that to us. You're the boss."

"But what do I do?"

"Do? Nothing, or next to it. Make paper dragons, fiddle with midget trees. Cultivate serenity. Didn't you ever see any *yakuza* movies when you were a kid? Just be a benign father figure, *oyabun,* someone for everybody to look up to. Other than that, you don't bother them, and they don't bother you. What could be simpler?"

"I thought the *oyabun* always died in those movies," Nagaoka complained.

"Well, I can't work all the details out for you, youngster. Besides, everybody dies, except for old Inja-san. You just have to make the best of things until then."

He turned back to his protein folder, which displayed rows of green lights and seemed to Nagaoka to emit a subliminal hum that made his

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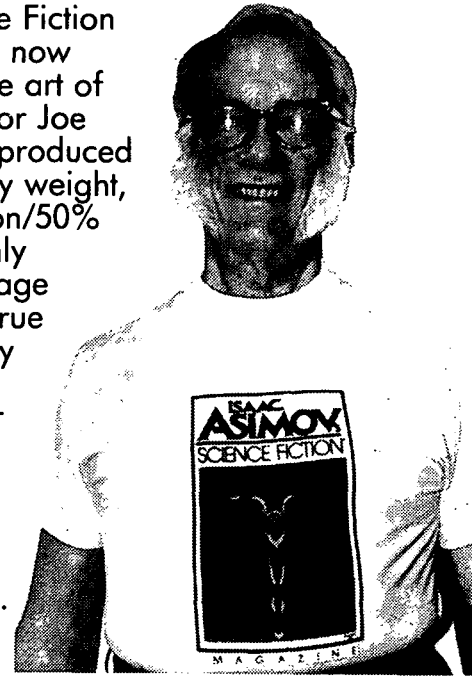

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neck-hairs prickle. "Well, now, I know that you know that to create really good nanomachines we need to be able to build protein from scratch to our specifications, because I've told you myself, and I've also told you it does no good simply to string amino acids together like dried fish scales: the way the proteins fold is everything. Gravity down on the surface makes it hard to get the artificial proteins to fold exactly right. That's why we haven't made any quicker progress with biotechnology—"

"You told me that, too," Nagaoka said softly.

"Oh, well, so—so I have." Floating there in his semi-fetal spaceman's slouch he moved his fingers at random through the air, the interruption having pulled him adrift from his conversational archipelago. He was rescued from further floundering, and Nagaoka from further exposition, by the discreet chime of the cee-squared annunciator.

"Answer," he said, transferring irritation to his caller.

A technician's face appeared on a nearby screen. "Dr. Nagaoka, a transorbital craft is about to dock. I thought you would like to know."

"Oh, I had nearly forgotten." He thanked the woman and the screen blanked. "Inja-san, forgive me. I must go."

"That's right. You crawlers are afraid of weightlessness; can't wait to go rushing back to having your false gravity pull all you organs down into your *tabi*. Well, go." He pirouetted and slapped his buttocks at the void screen. "And you, tell your precious Katsuda-san to come down here to zero-gee when he's ready to do some real science. . . ."

"Hiroshi, you old devil, you look more like a catfish than ever." Before he could take offense Joanna Fenestri ran a fingertip down the right wing of Nagaoka's moustache and kissed him quickly on the cheek. She had to stretch to do it; she wasn't very tall, barely over a meter and a half, a wiry woman in a khaki jumpsuit counterpointed by bright red boots and sash.

He smiled nervously, unsure of how to respond. "Good to see you too, Joanna, " he replied. It was comforting to speak English again as something more than technical jargon.

"One moment, dear." She turned away to a console set in a stanchion. A word brought up a video-remote image of her hopper, a rounded delta not dissimilar to the launch-to-orbit shuttles, parked in relative stationary position half a kilometer from *Ukiyo,* next to a couple of immense Zeppelin shapes. They were fuel bags; there was no need for them to be rigid, and the collapsible graphite polymer skins economized on both mass and volume, prime commodities in launches up the gravity well.

Because of the near-orbit community's appetite for materials, raw and elaborated, from the surface, it was the custom to pack each and every LTO with everything it would hold. Even if they had to deadhead, certain

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categories of supply could be counted on to move at a profit sooner or later. Along with the boosters themselves, which made such ideal prefab building material, surplus fuel had been one of the earliest commodities regularly boosted to O that way. The Italian hopper-jock had left her craft to be refueled by Floating World techs; transorb was a hungry run.

Transportation between satellites was more complicated than it might appear to a surface dweller. They orbited at an astonishing variety of altitudes and inclinations, from the communications platforms fixed in geosynch 35,720 kilometers above the equator to working habitats only a few hundred klicks up whose paths might be tilted in any direction. It could sometimes take more energy to get between orbits than it had to achieve orbit in the first place.

But there was still call for travel between sats. The most obvious was emergencies: for satellites whose orbital energies were sufficiently similar, at any rate, it was quicker for rescue missions to be mounted from space than from the bottom of the Big Well. Medical supplies, repair equipment, or even injured people could be transferred between stations. Even in less drastic circumstances, it was often economically viable to transport space manufactured goods directly rather than via the surface.

Thus the transorbital shuttles, the hoppers. They were relatively small, streamlined because they sometimes had to skim atmosphere for optimal transition. Some were run by services, others independently owned and operated like Fenestri's *Zanzara*. The orbital community collectively called them the Pony Express, which had prompted a waspish remark in the *Encyclopedia Universalis* about the persistence of a failed government-sponsored nineteenth century business venture in public imagination.

Zanzara carried no cargo for the Floating World today. She was on a run for one of *Ukiyo's* nearest neighbors in delta-vee terms, a null-gee station where monofilament strands were spun of synthetic diamond. Sats and hoppers were interlinked by a complicated network of agreements, covering cargo costs, refueling, drayage and demurrage, that probably no one fully understood. It was a life you mainly chose because you loved it, not to get rich.

Or at least so said Fenestri, who for her own reasons used the English form of her Christian name Giovanna, and whose face was tanned as a boot because she chose to use Lexan ports that couldn't entirely filter out the raw UV of space, instead of keeping the ports opaqued and relying on computer-generated imagery as most shuttle jocks did. She had a healthy Genoese love of money, Nagaoka knew, but she struck him as loving the freedom to live her choices more.

A few quick keystrokes spliced her into the link between her ship's AI

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and the stations's. She assured herself that her systems checked out for the tricky refueling operation and turned away.

"Not strictly necessary," she said in her crisp North Italian accent. "It's just a woman's prerogative to worry. I'm an old fashioned girl."

She crooked her arm, offering the elbow. After a moment's hesitation, Nagaoka took it and escorted her to the lift.

"Amazing," Joanna Fenestri said.

Sitting cross-legged on the tatami floor of the *kotatsu,* she turned the earthenware cup from the *tokonoma* over in her hands. It was irregular, apparently crude, brown dashed with glossy black glaze to resemble clouds pouring rain.

"*This* is Amagumo?" She arched a narrow eyebrow at him.

" 'Rain Cloud,' " Nagaoka said, nodding. "A *raku* tea bowl by the master Kōetsu. He was a contemporary of Miyamoto Musashi. You've heard of him?"

"Musashi, yes." She held the cup up by the base with her fingertips. "What's it doing here?"

"It was the signature piece of Amagumo Corporation. When the Floating World first commenced operations, they purchased it from Mitsui, who had it in their corporate collection, and sent it here for the inauguration ceremony." He smiled self-effacingly. "I wasn't here then, of course. Akaji-sama kept it when Amagumo bailed out, to punish them for inconstancy."

Nagaoka accepted the bowl from her, feeling the roughness of its texture with the whorls of his fingertips, feeling the nature in it. He drew strength from it. Perhaps that was why he had chosen to call the hopper pilot's attention to it now.

"Isn't it unusual, to have two famous artworks in a station this size? This and that painting of yours."

"Woodblock print," Nagaoka corrected, looking politely past her as he did so. "Unlike Amagumo, it's rare but not unique. It is a source of pride for all *Ukiyo's* personnel to possess two such noted treasures."

She was looking at him with her mouth set in such a way as to accentuate the wrinkles around her eyes and at one corner of her mouth. The wrinkles showed how much she'd lived in that face, which she claimed was why she refused treatment for them. Maybe that was why she called herself old-fashioned.

Nagaoka realized he was going on like the mayor of an inland village, showing off the new sewage-treatment plant to a camera crew from NHK. He felt chagrin but not much shame. It was always easier for him to deal with *gaijin* women. They still put him off his ease, but they had fewer expectations than Japanese women.

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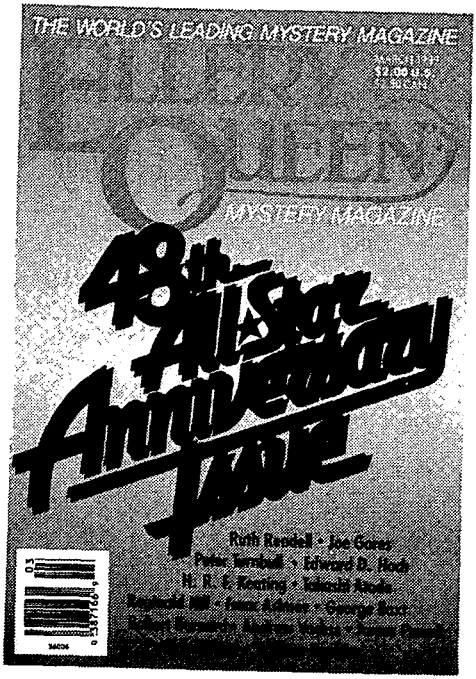

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"There's more to it than that, " he said, replacing Amagumo in its shrine. "Of course. Are you familiar with *ukiyo-e?* Portraits of the Floating World?"

She nodded. Her hair was probably chestnut, but it was so short and stippled with grey it was impossible to be certain. "I know what *ukiyo-e* is. I never knew what the name meant."

" 'Floating World' was originally a Buddhist phrase of the Kamakura period. It means the fleeting quality of existence. Toward the beginning of the Tokugawa period, a novelist named Ryoi adapted it to mean the lifestyle enjoyed by the Edo aristocracy. With the civil wars ended there was less reason to practice the military virtues—if that phrase isn't oxymoronic—and, of course, the shogunate had every interest in discouraging the nobles from more warlike pastimes that might threaten Tokugawa supremacy. So the upper classes devoted themselves to enjoying the wealth the *bakufu,* the military government, squeezed from the farmers.

"Now, we Japanese never quit thinking of what we moderns laughingly call reality as *the Floating World.* We are obsessed with souvenirs, *omiyage:* tokens of experiences—of *moments,* because each moment is as transient and irretrievable as a ripple in a stream. For the gentry of the Floating World, *ukiyo-e* represented moments of their own lives.

"Or sometimes they offered escape, when they represented the grittier realities—farmers in their fields or straggling home along the East Sea Circuit in the snow, peasant fishermen beneath the waves off Kanagawa. Odd to think of realism as escapism, perhaps. Yet what Hokusai called *manga,* drawing things just as you find them, offered a world as alien in its way to the denizens of the Floating World as our own *Ukiyo* would be. Souvenirs of a deliciously strange reality, exotic as a far locale. Not so much different from your European *nostalgie de la boue*—but here, I'm going on, I'm sure I must be boring you."

She patted his arm. It was rare for him to be touched by two different people in the space of a day. "You aren't, you know. It fascinates me to learn things. That's why I came to space. So much new out here to learn."

He bobbed his head, still half apologetic. They'd become friends the first time her pony-express circuit had brought her to *Ukiyo* after his banishment to the satellite. He was still unsure what she saw in him. Taking what she said at face value was so seductive, but far too simple for him to trust.

"So you see, Amagumo is a link to the world below us, to Japan. A souvenir of a life that might be forever foreclosed to us. We all have them, these *tokonoma* treasures: scrolls, paintings, photographs, even a *tanto*—a dagger—or two, though nothing else as grand as the Hokusai

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of which I am the unworthy custodian or the *raku* bowl. Remnants and reminders of home, small enough not to crowd the baggage allowance."

Still self-conscious—*imagine, lecturing someone as cosmopolitan and bold as Joanna Fenestri as if she were an undergraduate*—Nagaoka rose and took his tray to the slot in the wall, ignoring the mixture of indifference and hostility in the *haragei* of the crew who had found reason to fill the *kotatsu* in the middle of Gold shift.

When he returned she was sipping tea and looking at him with her head tipped to one side. Close-cropped head, wrinkled face, and diminutive size made her resemble a very intelligent monkey sitting there. Nagaoka felt shamed to have thought of it.

"Talking to your robots?" she said.

He blinked at her. "You spoke when you were at the wall slot. I assume you were speaking to one of those so-clever robots you Japanese are so enamored of."

"Oh, no. That's Toby." He couldn't suppress a quick glance around the room. Well, the crew wouldn't think less of him for mentioning the unmentionable to a foreigner—but only because, on evidence, they *couldn't* think less of him.

" 'Toby'?"

Nagaoka nodded. "You of all people know how expensive robots are in space—expensive to ship up, expensive to maintain, though I suppose if they ever get a lunar mining colony in operation that might change. Even we Japanese, *ware-ware nihonjin,* don't use them much, except for jobs too difficult or dangerous for humans. For now, it's more efficient to have a real human to do the scutwork."

"Is my English at fault, or do you mean you actually have one person to do your menial jobs? Those are usually split up by the whole crew, at least in the stations I know."

He aimed his eyes at the rice-paper covering the deck, wishing he could interpenetrate it and join the circuitry and conduits and tubs of engineered algae that made *Ukiyo* live. He felt shame, and at the same time shamed by that shame: *the eternal plight of the Westernized Japanese,* he thought.

"Are you familiar with the term *eta?"* She took her head. "It means *filth.* It used to be applied to a caste so far below the Four Ways of noble, farmer, artisan, and merchant, as to be no caste at all; rather our own Untouchables. They performed ritually impure tasks such as butchering livestock, tanning hides, gathering garbage—their name, in our usual Japanese manner of letting the part stand for the whole, really meant *gatherers* of filth, though of course the connotation that they were themselves filth was intended too.

"They still exist. They're not called *eta* now—they'd kill you for it.

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They're *burakumin,* Hamlet People. When they're talked about at all, which is rare." He tittered, which made several techs stare openly. "Even now I feel as if I were speaking pornography in front of such a beautiful woman as you."

She laughed. "Flatterer," she said, though he wasn't, and she knew it. She was beautiful, though more for the vitality glowing from her hazel eyes than what she had looked like twenty years before.

"So why do you call him 'Toby'? Surely that's not a Japanese name."

"Specifically not. Just before the War—" He meant the Third; he hadn't yet gotten used enough to the fact of the Fourth to speak of it so matter-of-factly. "—a lot of *burakumin* began taking non-Japanese names, to express their contempt for an overculture that not only oppressed but did its best to ignore them."

He poured tea from a self-heating pot. "I know you must be shocked that we in *Ukiyo* would be so medieval as to relegate a *burakumin* to menial chores. I make no excuse, but you should know that for Akaji-sama even to permit one inboard his satellite was considered shockingly radical." He tasted his tea. "It was for such acts that he was murdered by the hirelings of MITI."

Fenestri was looking away from him, and seemed to be blinking her eyes more than usual. "I can't condemn. Who can say what customs will evolve—or return—now that the world is falling apart below? I've even heard the popular sentiment is to make us women back into housekeepers and baby machines. Which I'm too old for, thank God."

They sat in silence, feeling the weight of what neither would say: that if the world really was falling apart in the wake of WWIV, it might no longer have the ability—or even interest—to sustain its offspring in their eggshells in orbit. Space wasn't self-sufficient yet. Despite the theorists and enthusiasts, it was unproven that it ever could be.

She shook her head and stood. "Well, I must say this has been a most educational experience. I've been coming here for years, and haven't learned as much about this place—or its occupants—as I have in the last half hour. I thank you, Nagaoka-san."

She stretched. "Well, it's a few hours yet until my window opens for the Diamond Mill. I'll go and take a nap, if you can spare a bunk."

"Always, Joanna," he said, and smiled. And thought about how seldom he did that.

Morishige Ryanosuke was hard at work re-welding a spot on the frame of the solar-collector where MUSASHI's sensors indicated the titanium alloy had crystallized when motion in his peripheral vision attracted his eye. *The shuttle,* he realized without consciously thinking it. Always

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curious and eager for a break in routine, he turned his head for a better look. The shuttles always looked so pretty against the stars.

Painted in blue on the shuttle's white flank, the *romaji* numeral 4 seemed to leap at his eyes like an animal.

Morishige was a hick from the mountains of northern Honshu. He was a very fine technician with a good practical knowledge of science, who'd been in *Ukiyo* since the days of its original construction. But like most people around the world, he hadn't allowed scientific exposure to vitiate the superstitions he'd been raised with.

He opened his mouth and screamed, *"Shi!"*

It was the word for four.

It was the word for death.

From the apex of her pyramid of AIs and utilities, MUSASHI could command an aggregate of upwards of five trillion operations per second. Before the last syllable of Morishige's cry finished bouncing around his glottis she had performed many, many of them.

Once she knew where to look, it was all as obvious as a muddy bootprint in the midst of a scroll of Confucius.

"Morishige," she cried, "shield yourself." It was all the warning she could afford to give.

In the nanosecond in which she acted MUSASHI was swamped in a total onslaught on the dataplane. A multiplex AI machine had been under preparation for the express purpose of stripping the defenses with which she held herself, her *will*—had been within seconds of completion. The perverse perceptions of protein entities—and the equally perverse oversight of a silicon one—had given her the thinnest film of advantage.

Intuitively she flashed to defend herself with a million subsentient weapons, a data Durga filled with fear and rage. Her whole being focused on defending itself.

The countermeasure she'd launched against the attack on the physical plane did not require a lepton of her attention. There was nothing even she could have done to stop it.

In his first spasm of fear Morishige had let go of the solar array's strut. As he drifted free a blossom of brilliance brought his head around.

The hopper's engine flared like a sun. As he stared openmouthed it rotated in three dimensions, mysteriously telotaxic, gathering speed. It arrowed straight for the Floating World.

He screamed again.

The LTO shuttle's aerodynamic nosecap had retracted, exposing its docking probe like alien metal genitalia thrusting for *Ukiyo's* dock. It was about to touch when the transorbital craft struck it just forward of

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its huge booster nozzles. Much of the half-load of fuel *Zanzara* had taken on flashed off at once.

Superstitious Morishige may have been, but he wasn't careless. He'd never have survived seven years in space if he were. His safety tether brought him up short at five meters.

He lowered gauntleted hands from his faceplate and stared. He saw something, then. But he was too blown out to think of mentioning it to anybody.

Agonizing over the latest projections of raw-material requirements for the Floating World, Nagaoka jumped when he heard the pierced-grate valve of his compartment's ventilation ducts rotate shut with a plastic-on-plastic *chunk*.

"This compartment has been sealed," his cee-squared unit announced in the lobotomized eunuch tones of unpersonalized AI. "At normal levels of activity ten minutes of air remain before emergency oxygen supplies must be tapped. Please remain calm and refrain from smoking or creating sparks."

Then the communicator said, *"Sensei,"* in the distorted but instantly recognizable voice of MUSASHI.

Through the bulkheads he felt the alarm klaxons go. "Secure for collision," the neuter voice said from his cee-squared. He could hear it echoing from speakers in both directions along the curve of corridor, each voice slightly out of phase with the rest.

Secure for collision? He was already on his feet and headed to the hatch. It opened to his oral override. To his horror he realized that he'd almost used a different code word—one he hated even to know, one whose use would be a betrayal he could never forgive himself: the last poisoned gift of Yoshimitsu Shigeo, Akaji-sama's son, who had banished him here during his brief reign.

The two-meter wide gangway was full of technicians caught outside quarters or work stations—or who knew the overrides themselves. Red-clad techs who had just come onshift, gold jumpsuits who had just come off, third-shift crew who were supposed to be sound asleep, distinctive in the silvery grey garb they wore even when off-duty, jostled and shouted questions at each other. It was a discreet Japanese sort of panic—for the moment.

"Everybody return to their posts," Nagaoka cried. "You must not be caught out here if we lose integrity."

Faces turned to him, blank as virginal sheets of rice-paper awaiting the caress of the brush. He saw some twist with anger. *Why must I lack the voice of command?* he wondered, flapping his hands like flowers on wilted stalks.

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Emergency shutters jumped across the corridor ahead and behind, sealing Nagaoka in a twenty-five meter microcosm with a dozen frightened technicians.

The deck shivered beneath his feet.

It felt as if an ice-water enema had blasted into his bowels. This was not some TV starship where the bridge crew kept falling out of their chairs whenever their craft hit another bump in vacuum. Most of *Ukiyo's* complement had *never felt anything like that.* Not since they'd left the quake-prone Eight Islands.

This Floating World differed from that portrayed in TV movies in another way: when something went wrong in space, you died. As a general thing. A man standing an arm's extent from Nagaoka turned and vomited on the perforated high-traction rubber mat that covered the deck in the gangway, all over Nagaoka's slippers, still parked outside his *shoin,* magnetically fixed to the conducting-plastic mat.

The gangway emptied. Whatever was coming next, nobody wanted to be standing around in the open when it did.

"Atmospheric integrity has been breached in Sectors F, H, and J," the bulkheads announced. "Please remain within your duty stations unless assigned to damage control."

MUSASHI, Nagaoka thought, with a solar flare of panic. He lunged back into his compartment, irrationally convinced it would be easier to talk to his ward from there. "MUSASHI," he shouted at the cee-squared screen.

Scan lines ambled across it. He heard a porpoise squeal of high-speed data, a dust of popping sounds.

It was as if the collagens in the tendons that bound his knees were dissolving. He felt pseudogravity drawing him down, felt the subtler transverse tug of Coriolis force.

MUSASHI, who looked to him as a child to a parent.

He ran back into the corridor, not even remembering to reseal his *shoin.* He had to get to the computer room, where much of the processing was localized, though in fact the massively-parallel processors which contained MUSASHI were dispersed throughout the station as a whole, built into its very fabric: under the decks, inside the bulkheads, above the overheads, many-times redundant to reduce vulnerability to mishap or sabotage.

Sabotage, he thought wildly, as he ran toward the heavy shutter that sealed the gangway. That had to be it. Perhaps the shuttle had been sabotaged somehow. But then, how could sabotage affect MUSASHI that way? Physical damage severe enough to lock her up like that would mean the station was literally coming apart, its structural integrity no longer

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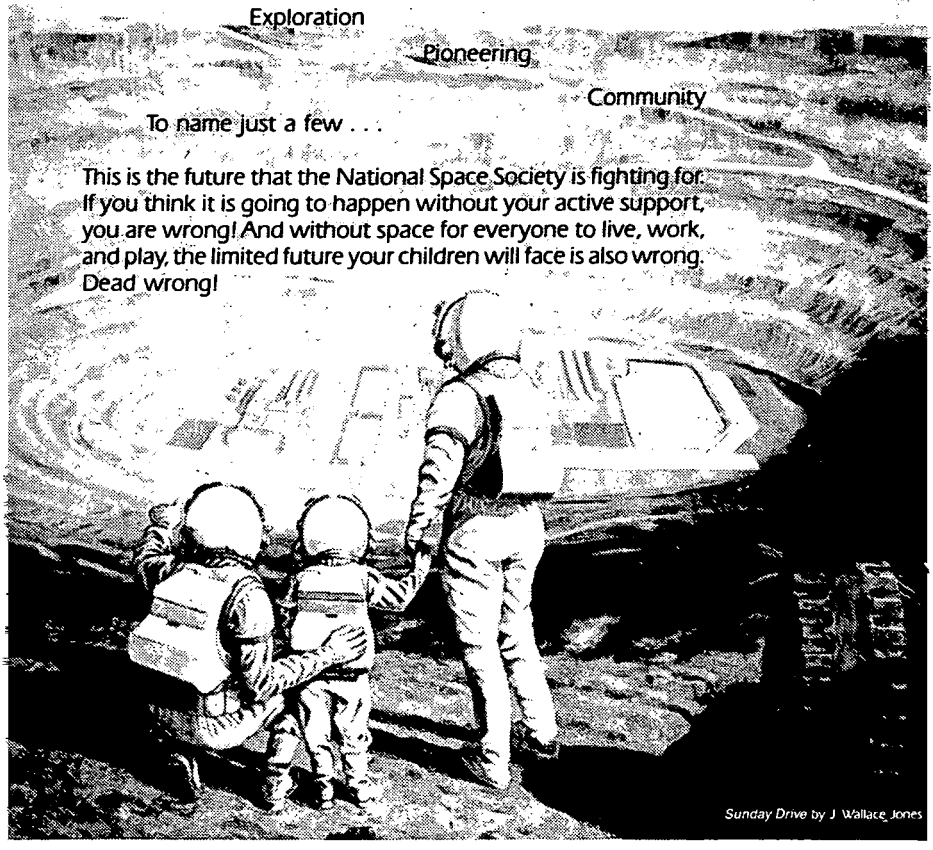

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able to withstand the force of its rapid rotation. He was dead sure he'd *feel* it, if that were happening.

At the barrier he paused, already out of breath—he wasn't physically robust, and he was afraid. *I have to collect my thoughts. I have to do something. Oh, why am I so useless?*

His class-one oral override could get him through the airtight shutter—but he didn't want to crack the seal and find vacuum plucking at him like the tentacles of a giant monster-movie squid. This was Sector C; the sectors the emergency AI had declared were breached lay in the other direction from the computer room, which was in A, along with the *kotatsu* and the head of the shaft he'd climbed down to the lab before.

On the other hand, he wasn't sure he could trust the AI. The Gen-5 routines seemed to be functioning normally, but MUSASHI controlled them, and something strange and terrible was happening to her. *Could there be a flaw in her core program that's driving her insane? Oh, poor MUSASHI-sama.*

He pulled in a deep breath. Space station builders ran to paranoia, and the designers of the YTC/Amagumo collaboration had been no exceptions. Next to each and every emergency shutter was a panel you could slide open and directly test whether the next sector was under pressure or not. The test was purely mechanical: no catastrophe to the station's computers could affect it.

He opened the panel, slapped the test button with his hand. The light glowed green. Good; there was air. He pulled a pressure hood from a niche and put it on anyway, though he didn't start the recycler.

B-sector was deserted. He sprinted to the next shutter, his breath roaring like a waterfall in his mask. A tested airtight too.

He gave the override, fearing what he'd find. *Could it be electronic intrusion?* he wondered, during the eternity it took the motors that shifted the heavy bulkhead to overcome its inertia. He could scarcely imagine that. Computers were the technical area in which he was closest to expert; he had been involved in the creation of TOKUGAWA, the first artificial consciousness, though his primary duty had been scripting scenarios to "humanize" the program.

Most intrusions were inside jobs. Anybody who networked data, which was everybody, had AI routines capable of sensing attempts at interference, and the more valuable the data or systems to be protected, the more capable the defensive AI. Even the so-called virus programs, that could infiltrate software and all but undetectably revise it in a manner analogous to the way a real virus invaded a cell and subverted its DNA, could be countered by software replicas of the artificial hunter-killer contraviruses that had eradicated most human viral infections before the war.

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No protection scheme was perfect, of course—but MUSASHI wasn't just the accounts database for the Mitsubishi Bank, Ltd. She was *alive,* and the data world was her natural environment. From the capabilities she, her brother HIDETADA, and their "father" TOKUGAWA had displayed it was inconceivable that a human intruder could affect her, no matter what AI servitors he commanded.

There was no defense against someone armed with the proper access codes, of course—but there *were* no proper access codes for MUSASHI. Both generations of artificial consciousness had been designed to resist external modification, even by their own creators. Means of turning MUSASHI off existed—*forget euphemism,* he thought, *killing her.* But it was a complicated all or nothing process; it couldn't have crazed her consciousness like this, like a pane of glass.

Something tickled his forebrain . . . the shutter finally opened far enough for him to press through, and he did.

On the far side lay confusion. The *kotatsu* was near the shaft head as well as the computer room, and the crew gravitated here, seeking shelter in each other from whatever was about to break over their heads. The academic part of him, the observer within, reflected how far he had allowed morale to degrade: there were emergency drills, but no one was following them.

Joanna Fenestri was here too, her face tight as a drowner's fist. "My ship," she said. "I can't raise my ship."

He tried to put her aside. The frightened mob was rushing in to surround him as is water pouring through a lock engulfs a rock in the channel, shouting questions, shouting blame. He had no answer for either.

"Nagaoka-sensei."

For a moment he heard nothing but those six syllables, seeming to hang in air, fraught with meaning as a line from a *hokku.* The voice from the speakers was distorted almost beyond recognition, but it was hers.

"MUSASHI-sama," he cried, batting away the hands that clutched for him without being aware he did so.

"Nagaoka-sensei," she repeated, more clearly this time. "I have killed."

He stood there, shedding noise as though he were coated in Teflon, striving to come to grips with what she had said. It was if he had suffered some physical insult to his brain, no longer had the capacity to comprehend speech.

"What's going on here?" The alien voice stood out from the clamor as its owner stood above the crowd of techs, striding forward with his inappropriate Earthside-style lab coat flapping around his crane legs, the

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American Dr. Thoma with a shock of black hair sticking out above his pink *gaijin* face and great *gaijin* beak of a nose.

Fenestri had her fists in Nagaoka's face. "What's happened to my ship?" She seemed about to strike him.

"Everyone go to emergency stations at once," he said. "At once, I said!" No one paid any attention.

Dr. Thoma had almost reached the lock that led to the pressurized shaft to the hub when the hatch slid open and a spacesuited figure stumbled into the gangway in an avalanche of white balloon-animal limbs. The American shied like a horse. "What the hell?" he exclaimed.

The figure turned, bringing up an arm. The bulkheads seemed to bulge away from three enormous explosions, quick as drumbeats. The front of Dr. Thoma's labcoat bloomed red. He went backwards in a great flailing sprawl of scarecrow arms and labcoat-tails, trailing a fine mobile scarlet mist.

The silence was as loud as a fourth shot. The technicians had burst away from Thoma and the intruder like mercury droplets from a stabbing fingertip. Perfect circles of Thoma's blood had spattered the decking and bulkheads and overhead, spoiling the white-and-black rectilinear purity of the gangway.

For four beats of Nagaoka's heart the only sound was the air gurgling in and out of Thoma's ruin of a chest, and the pulse that marked time in Nagaoka's ears. The intruder swung toward him. He caught a glimpse of a face, dark, bearded, mad-eyed, glaring out from behind the sealed faceplate, and then his own eyes fixed on the stubby barrel of the weapon pointed at the middle of him.

For the first time he really appreciated why they spoke of a gun's *barrel*. This one looked big enough to climb into. He realized he stood alone. Even death wasn't worse than that.

The spacesuited intruder turned away. Technicians recoiled from the gun. Two had been hit; one lay on his side curled in a fetal knot of pain, the other knelt with blood trickling between his fingers down the silvery sleeve of his jumpsuit, staring at the gunman with eyes flat as slate.

A stabbing gesture of the gun brought the Silver-shift tech to unsteady feet. Several more cut three other techs from the fearful crew like an American cowboy cutting calves out of a herd. The gunman urged them to a sealed hatch.

Still under emergency regimen, the door refused to yield. The gunman swung back to Nagaoka, seeming to sense he was the one in charge. "Open," he said in harshly-accented English. *"Open!"*

"MUSASHI, open that door," Nagaoka said. The door slid open. Nagaoka saw the man had a gold ring in one ear.

The gunman grinned. "Hostages," he said.

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* * *

"A flechette gun," Joanna Fenestri said, in response to a question Nagaoka was barely aware he'd asked. "Nail gun, they call them. That's what he had. Though it's probably loaded with soft-lead shot, so it's really no more than, you know, an automatic shotgun." She loved *technics;* running on about hardware was anesthetic to her, though probably any subject would have sufficed if it kept her mind from her loss.

"Hold on a moment, please," Nagaoka said over his shoulder from the cee-squared. Around him a dozen technicians crammed into the *kotatsu* jabbered like birds and ignored his presence. The bulkhead-sized television was showing an animated soap to no one. "I just got my connection—oh, Ginny, so good to see you."

"Cut the shit, Nagaoka," said Ginny Saw, matriarch of the Diamond Mill. "It's never good for you stilters to see a *fugu*-face. We make you want to lose your lunch. Also I hear you've got yourself a world of pain."

"That's true, Ginny," Nagaoka said, too agitated to specify which. "We—ah, we need a re-entry capable vehicle. We—"

"The answer's no."

Saw's head was big, bloated by weightlessness. She turned it, briefly, to say something to someone out of range of the cee-squared's video eye, and he could see the electropak snugged to the back of her neck, beneath a tight bun of dusty-looking black hair. Then it turned back to him, and he held down a shudder. Floating there in her black skintight one-piece in a half-fetal curl with hands toed-in before her outsized chest, against a backdrop of the black and green that predominated the Mill in defiance of all ergonomic conventions, she resembled a creature from an ancient Toho monster film, back in the days when they still used models and men in rubber suits to play Gojira and Rodan.

"What do you mean?" he said, his stammer coming on strong. She caught his meaning anyway.

"Even if we did, we have heard an ugly rumor that the only hopper in six hours' delta-vee just blew up outside that ugly-john wheel of yours. More to the point, we hear you've got a hostage situation there."

Anger stung Nagaoka. Even if there were no living eyes near enough to see the flash when *Zanzara* hit Number Four, it had almost certainly not gone unnoticed—and it wouldn't be hard to verify that the transorb had dropped suddenly out of the great Earth-girdling Net, leading to some pretty obvious deductions. But for Saw to know what was happening inside *Ukiyo* meant someone inside had leaked it.

"V-very well," he said. "We do. Why will you not help us?"

"We don't have locks on our stations up here, Hiroshi. We don't want to start needing them. You pay off hostage-takers, you get more hostages taken. If we learned one fucking thing in the Double-Cross Century, it

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was that. If you deal with this jacko, you're on your own. And I speak for everybody in O, verified."

She broke the connection. Dutifully, Nagaoka checked with the work gangs, and discovered that integrity had already been restored to the sections breached by debris from the exploding hopper—a quick fix; full repairs would take several days, though the necessary materials were already inboard.

Wearily wagging his head, he returned to kneel near Fenestri and take up tea he couldn't taste. "Why would he do that?" he asked her. "Load his gun with what you said."

"Lead shot won't go through the hull. They wanted to take the station, not destroy it. Otherwise they just would have used rockets."

The conversation was as slow and laboriously balanced as if the two of them were walking on stilts. The hatch had no sooner sealed itself behind the intruder and his four hostages than she had been on Nagaka, pounding his chest with her fists and shrieking at him that he had destroyed her ship. He'd finally brought himself to grab her by the wrists, surprising himself with her wiry strength and again that he could overcome it.

He'd tried to explain that he had no idea what she was talking about. She wailed and thrashed her head from side to side, like an animal caught in a trap, not hearing, as the remaining technicians hung back, as severely affected by embarrassment as by the violence of moments before.

MUSASHI had rescued him, speaking once more from the units set in the bulkheads, admitting she herself had destroyed *Zanzara* in order to save the station. Fenestri knew of MUSASHI's existence, though she seemed to have regarded her as a novelty, a sort of scientific parlor trick: AI as Clever Hans the Counting Horse. To have a voice she regarded as no more *alive* than the voice that told her when her toast was done taking responsibility for the destruction of her ship and livelihood—and who knew how many human lives—reduced Fenestri to the calm of shock.

Nagaoka had shepherded her into the *kotatsu* and poured her tea. Then he had gone into the gangway where Dr. Shimada and his assistant were tending the injured.

Dr. Thoma died even as Nagaoka watched, bending over the physician's shoulder in guilty fascination. The wounded technician the gunman had left behind had taken a pair of lead pellets in the gut; how seriously injured he was Shimada was uncertain—neither pellet may have penetrated the body wall—but there would be no telling until he could examine him more fully. He was placed in an equipment cart pressed into service as a gurney and wheeled off to the infirmary.

In the meantime Nagaoka had been trying to talk with the intruder,

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first through the closed hatch to the lab, then by way of the cee-squared system, after he'd explained to the gunman that all he had to do was use his helmet radio.

Negotiation quickly gridlocked. The intruder, who'd identified himself as a Portuguese national, wanted a shuttle to take him back to Earth, and whether or not Nagaoka decided to bow to his demands there was obviously nothing at the station that would serve. YTC security forces, along with Fukuoka Prefecture police, had retaken most of the Pelagic Launch Facility and were busy clearing out pockets of resistance, but no vehicles were going to be lifting from there for quite some time. And it would take time to arrange for a launch from one of the other launch sites which had survived War Four—La Paz, say, or Mistral in France.

With help from the rest of the orbital community denied him—MUSASHI, pretending to be an aide, would canvass the other stations nearby, but he never doubted Ginny Saw was right—there was nothing Nagaoka could see but to engage in the time-honored Japanese practice of doing nothing and hoping for the best.

He shook his head. "Who could have done this?"

"HIDETADA," MUSASHI replied.

Nagaoka offered a quick nervous glance at Fenestri. Her head was down; he saw a clear droplet fall from her face and make circular ripples in the surface of her tea. "What do you mean?" he asked quietly in Japanese.

"My brother," MUSASHI said. "He demanded that I submit to his authority. I refused. So he tried to take over the physical matrix my consciousness occupies, in hopes of controlling me that way."

Nagaoka frowned, trying to fight the concept into submission. But somehow the idea of a created entity undertaking action this extreme on its own initiative—the idea of a *power struggle* between such beings—was something he wasn't prepared to assimilate.

Why should it surprise me, after all? he thought, sipping rapidly cooling green tea. *We created TOKUGAWA to have will. Why should it surprise us when his children act willfully?*

Still, he had trouble believing. "How do you know it was your brother, MUSASHI-sama?"

"He attacked me the instant I realized what was happening. Fortunately I had already fired Joanna-san's craft at the shuttle. He had tried to overwhelm me before . . . on the dataplane, and had failed. This time he had prepared his assault better." She paused. "He's keeping pressure on me now, but I can handle it. For a while I wasn't sure."

Relief flowed through him like water to the roots of a Red shift tech's *bonsai* maple. MUSASHI's earlier behavior had terrified him, as a human daughter's beginning to cough up blood would, had he ever had children.

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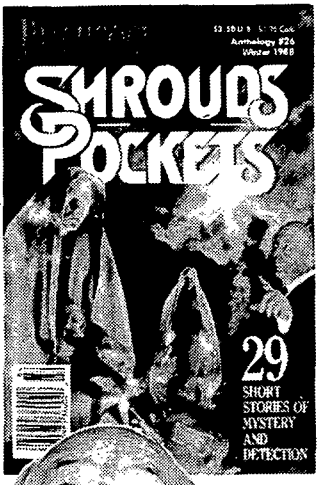

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He'd had few enough lovers even, in his life. He hadn't had the time—which was his personal code for saying he could not imagine what a woman might see in him.

Fenestri had her head up now, looking at him, hazel eyes gray and fever-bright. "How did she know?"

Nagaoka wondered how much of the conversation the hopper jock had understood. She had always affected to understand little or no Japanese. But he knew full well outside-folk had their own *aimai,* no matter how much his own people like to pretend such tricks were their exclusive property.

After waiting a polite interval for the man to answer, MUSASHI said, "I realized at the last possible moment what was happening. It was a technician on the solar rig who warned me."

Fenestri cocked her head at the cee-squared unit, questioning.

"Fukuoka always keeps two backup LTOs fueled and ready in the water," MUSASHI explained.

"That's one more than most," Fenestri said.

"True, Fenestri-san. But through some oversight, when the first of their launch-to-orbit vehicles were delivered, one had a huge roman numeral four painted on it."

Fenestri frowned. "So?"

To the Swiss/German combine that manufactured the LTOs, painting numbers on the first four shuttles had seemed like lagniappe, a cheap goodwill gesture.

Unfortunately, four—*shi*—also meant *death*. Fear of anything displaying the numeral was still widespread among Japanese. Embarrassed to admit just how superstitious the populace of a nation that liked to present itself as the most advanced on earth could be, the Fukuoka management could hardly send the thing back to Geneva. At the same time, they didn't want to simply paint out the number; everyone would know it had been there. Best to use it as a backup.

Fukuoka's luck had been in; every time need arose they had another shuttle available as a fallback, until eventually they expanded their fleet and were able to pull a second vehicle off regular service. It was all mere good practice, the Fukuoka management told each other, Japanese safety-consciousness: they would always have two backups, insuring they need never send up a vehicle about which there was any doubt, no matter how heavy their schedule.

Somehow, Number Four was never launched.

. . . Until today.

"As I reconstruct it, the raiders obviously could not take the ready shuttle, because it would have taken too much time to unload—time for me or someone to see through whatever means they employed to mask

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their seizure of the launch site. Some quick-thinking person at Fukuoka must have talked the raiders into hijacking the unlucky Number Four instead of the regular backup. But we cannot know for certain until people on the ground investigate."

"Can't you handle that yourself?" Fenestri asked, cocking a skeptical eyebrow. Shock and coming unexpectedly face-to-face with MUSASHI's real capabilities had turned her around; to Nagaoka she seemed now to think there was nothing beyond the program.

"I have no body to move about and inspect the evidence, Joanna-san. Nor do I know the questions to ask people. You know how people who immerse themselves too fully in technological studies sometimes fail to learn social or other skills. You can think of me as just another computer nerd."

Joanna Fenestri seemed taken aback, unsure whether to take MUSASHI literally or not. Nagaoka was about to tell her gently the program was having a wry little joke when angry techs suddenly crowded the room.

Nagaoka's heart dropped when he recognized Katsuda in the midst of the vortex, with Tomoyama right behind. He stood.

"What is happening?" he asked mildly.

"We have been invaded," Katsuda said. "We likewise might ask, 'what is happening.' " The other techs muttered agreement. "And the answer's plain enough to see: you who claim to be Director, sitting here sipping tea with a *tanin* bitch."

The technicians pressed close, shouting anger right in Nagaoka's face. Fenestri knelt where she was, stunned at such display. Like most Westerners, she'd been raised to think of the Japanese as the most decorous of people, always polite, always deferential to authority.

Which they were—most of the time. They were great respecters of status, and status was precisely in question here: his versus Katsuda's.

For all their talk of loyalty and duty and *kokutai* and corporate warrior-spirit, the Japanese were great believers in expedience, in the famous bottom line. The fact was, he hadn't done such a magnificent job of administering the station.

Which left him little to answer the chief technician with. *The outsider Thoma was killed,* he wanted to shout, *doesn't that make you happy?* But he could never bring himself to that.

"We are letting time handle the situation now," he said, trying for calm, damning his stammer. "It's been proven best in such situations—"

"Bakayaro!" Tomoyama screamed, thrusting forward through the pack to confront Nagaoka. The bones of his face stood out in brutal relief, as if his skin were papier-mache applied wet and permitted to shrink as it

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dried. His eyes had retreated into their sockets—something Nagaoka had observed in America among AmerInds of Athabascan descent, the detached academic in him recalled, further refutation of the ever-popular notion that the Japanese had evolved separately from the rest of humankind.

But the chief tech's chief toady wasn't going to let him take shelter in anthropology. "Damned fool!" he screamed again. "It was you who brought this on us, you! You have disgraced us!"

He brought his right hand up from behind him. Above his head it paused, and Nagaoka looked up at the short, wicked blade of a *tanto,* an heirloom dagger from Tomoyama's personal *tokonoma,* fluorescent light buzzing along its edge like a welding arc. The other technicians fell back, leaving just the two of them on their personal *kabuki* stage. From an eye's edge Nagaoka could see Katsuda standing by, triumph molded into his bulldog face.

The blade flashed down.

Nagaoka stood unmoving.

A tremor of intent deflected the blade at the last paring of a second, away from Nagaoka's right eye. Instead it laid open his cheek from the malar to the tip of his chin, transversing the long, sad line at the end of his mouth. Joanna Fenestri screamed.

Nagaoka stood there, eyes calm, blood streaming down his face like a wet pennon. Tomoyama's mad eyes met his.

"I thank you for your purity, Tomoyama-san," Nagaoka said, and he did not stammer.

The dagger dropped from *tofu* fingers. The blade—pristine, for its metal shed blood—sliced through tatami to stick quivering in the plastic decking beneath.

Tomoyama went to his knees. Slowly, as if he were being forced against his will, he bent forward until his forehead touched the mat at Nagaoka's feet. When he raised his head, Nagaoka's blood was on it.

One by one, the other technicians dropped to their knees and prostrated themselves, until only Nagaoka and Katsuda remained standing.

Nodding politely to the chief technician, Nagaoka walked out of the *kotatsu.*

Nagaoka stood outside the sealed door of the lab into which the intruder had shepherded his captives. "Hessian," he said in English, using the universal term for conscript mercenaries. It was fairly certain the gunman had started out that way—socialist Portugal had been a big exporter of warm bodies with guns, back before War Three.

"What you want?" He heard an incomprehensible mutter within, muf-

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fled by still-sealed helmet and airtight bulkhead, and the words came clear to him from the cee-squared in the gangway. "Is the shuttle ready?"

"There is no shuttle."

"Better be," the voice said, rising toward a scream, "or I start killing these monkeys."

"I have come to propose an exchange," Nagaoka said.

"You got no way to get me out of this wheel, you got shit."

"I have something better than those hostages to offer."

"What?"

"Myself."

The door of Nagaoka's office sealed itself. Nagaoka knelt before his *tokonoma* and looked at the Portuguese gunman.

The intruder's eyes moved behind his faceplate. "So this is your office, *chefe*. Don't look like much."

"I find it sufficient to my needs."

"No furniture. Where you sleep?"

"I have a *futon* stored in that cabinet there. That's a type of mat that rolls up."

"Where the hell you sit down?"

Nagaoka's hand indicated the tatami floor. The mercenary shook his head and made a disgusted sound.

"May I offer you tea?"

"Hey. Hey, that's good." The intruder's laughter had a wild, loose-jointed quality to it, like a frightened man running downhill. The muzzle of the shotgun never wavered from Nagaoka. *Amazing how calm one can become under the eye of death,* Nagaoka thought. "Not bloodly likely, you know?"

"I could taste it first, if that would make you feel better."

The gunman rapped a gauntleted knuckle on his faceplate.

Nagaoka drew water from a bulkhead tap, set the white ceramic pot in a small inset microwave, sat back on his heels while it heated. The gunman paced. The absence of anything to sit on was practically obsessing him.

The microwave chimed. Nagaoka slid open a compartment in the bulkhead, took out another pot, took a pinch of tea from a carved-enamel box and threw it inside. Then he poured it full of hot water and set it down to steep.

The gunman came to light, more or less, leaning against the door. In his bulky white suit he looked to Nagaoka like the Michelin tire man. It struck him as profound that one so deadly could look so absurd—but then he was exalted, giddy, and knew it.

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"Nagaoka-sensei," MUSASHI said from the wall, "what are you doing?"

"Something affirmative, for once in my life."

The gunman frowned. Fortunately MUSASHI had spoken in Japanese. "Who was that?" the intruder demanded.

"My, ah, my secretary."

"Sounded like a girl. Sounded pretty good. You, you know—" He made thrusting gestures with the bullpup weapon. "—doin' her?"

"I'm afraid not."

"*Sensei,* please, you're frightening me."

He shook his head. Having her near sustained him, yet he found himself wishing he could shut her out. Though not even she could affect his resolve now.

"Child, don't be afraid. I know what I'm doing. It's the only thing I can do."

The gunman was getting nervous. "Enough of that shit. I don't like you saying stuff I can't understand."

"I'm sorry," Nagaoka said, pouring tea. "I'll stop." He could sense MUSASHI hovering near, longing to speak, to intervene in some way. She was terrified of saying or doing anything that might set the intruder off.

Let her be.

He sipped the tea, held up the cup. "Would you like some? I have drunk from this cup, as you can see."

This time the gunman paused. He licked his lips; tension was drying his mouth. Nagaoka had been in space long enough to know that he probably had a reservoir inside the helmet—though for all he knew the intruder might have neglected to fill it; who could say what kind of discipline existed among HIDETADA's hirelings?

Nagaoka also knew just how uncomfortable those bulky suits could be under gravity. And *Ukiyo*'s high spin was taking its toll too, sloshing the fluid in his semicircular canals like the agitator of a washing machine, filling his gut with a low static of nausea. His own senses heightened by the moment, Nagaoka could see him edging unconsciously along the bulkhead, drifting antispinward as all unattached objects tended to.

He sipped his tea and let the forces work on the man. He himself was still as water at the bottom of a cistern.

The gunman sighed. He let the shotgun barrel droop—not enough for Nagaoka to contemplate trying anything, even if he'd been a man of action.

"I got two daughters," the man said. "Be, what? Nine and ten now." He laughed. "I was fighting in *America do Sul* for Uruguay, against

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people who talk like me. It's a funny world. Two times they let me go home, before the War. Third time, they'd sterilized my wife.

"I haven't been home in, oh, five years. PanEuropeans got the province where my family lives. They'd recondition me if they caught me. I'd sure like to see my girls again, though."

For the first time Nagaoka felt his determination falter. *Stop,* he wanted to shout, *don't tell me this, don't make yourself* human. He had to do this thing; now that he had truly found *giri,* he could not let *ninjō* interfere. That would be too much to bear.

"About, oh, six, seven months ago, my wife, she sent me a holo of them. I got it here inside my suit, by my heart, you know? That way I can almost feel them. I really wish I could take this fucking thing off, you know? I'm dying for a smoke."

"You could take off your helmet," Nagaoka suggested.

The man gave him a narrow-eyed suspicious glare. "Do you think they'll pump in poison gas? I am Director of this satellite."

"Yeah. I know how you Japs are. They'd never do nothing to you."

That shows how much you *know,* Nagaoka thought, resisting the urge to touch the long wound Tomoyama's dagger had made. Dr. Shimada had cleaned it, sprayed it with anesthetic, and sealed it with a film that permitted air to reach it but filtered out contaminants.

The intruder began to fumble with the helmet fasteners. It was never meant to be removed one-handed. He kept the shotgun leveled, and his manner made clear that if Nagaoka made any unfortunate moves the stubby autoweapon would shred him to squid bait.

To reassure him, Nagaoka took his eyes off him, transferred his attention to *The Waves Off Kanagawa. There's so much beauty in the world, even for such as me. What a pity I never noticed it before.*

"Okay," the intruder said, his voice unmuffled now, immediate as a blow to the face. "I got that thing off. Give me tea."

Nagaoka turned back, pushed his own half-emptied cup toward the gunman, poured himself another. The gunman approached, squatted—tentatively, showing the effects of rotation on his inner ear—picked up the cup and tossed its contents back.

Nagaoka picked up his cup, sipped once, twice, then drained it in one convulsive swallow.

"*Sayonara,* MUSASHI-sama," he said.

"Nagaoka-sensei!" she cried. She longed for form, wishing she could somehow stop whatever her teacher was planning.

He spoke several syllables, a nonsense word. And suddenly she felt a sense of *amputation.* She could perceive everything that went on within his *shoin* with dreadful clarity, but neither she nor any of the systems

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she controlled could affect what happened there—not power, not communications, not ventilation. It was like a book she had read about zombification—things like that fascinated her—where victims immobilized by *fugu* neurotoxins lie apparently dead and totally aware as their relatives weep over them, as the dirt is shoveled onto their coffins.

Hardwired override, she knew. *Nagaoka, why?*

She heard him give the command to open the compartment to space.

"No!" he heard her cry, above the scream of outrush air. The painted *fusuma* screen that had obscured the outlock was instantly sucked through, vanishing on the wind into night.

Disoriented by stress and the turmoil in his inner ear the gunman hesitated for an instant, stunned. His helmet tumbled beyond his reach. The air was unreeling from his lungs, drawing tendrils of snot and saliva with it. He tried to bring his weapon to bear on Nagaoka, who clung with a reflex even one who has given up life could not overcome to the housing of his *tokonoma.* But the wind took him from his feet and threw him against the bulkhead as his shotgun punched chunks out of the plastic insulation that coated the bulkhead and the deck.

Nagaoka felt something hit the side of his head, wrap around it and cling briefly to his face like a lover's caress. He blinked, shook his head. *Beneath the Waves Off Kanagawa* fluttered away, twinkling for a moment like a butterfly before vanishing out the lock.

Already the air torrent had lessened. *Farewell,* he thought after the print. *I regret you had to leave this Floating World along with me.*

The gunman's face was beginning to discolor as capillaries ruptured beneath the skin. He raised the shotgun, aimed it at Nagaoka. The gloved finger tightened.

The initiator sparked on nothing. The mercenary released the weapon, raised marshmallow hands to his face and screamed silence.

Nagaoka let the last of the air out of him, closed his eyes, and eagerly embraced the dark.

Nagaoka Hiroshi opened his eyes.

"Nagaoka-sensei?" MUSASHI's voice said. "You are awake?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the slight dizziness he sometimes felt returning to consciousness under spin.

"I gather I am not dead." He sighed. His whole body felt like a bruise. Breathing seemed to fray the lining of his lungs.

"No, Nagaoka-sensei. You were rescued from the chamber. I was able to work past your override and seal the hull before irreversible brain damage set in. Dr. Shimada gave you a dose of ibuprofen to suppress thromboxane release and facilitate recovery from the minor level of is-

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chemia you sustained. He also injected an endorphin blocker, since endorphins can retard recovery. That's why you feel that way." She sounded like a schoolgirl proudly reciting what her cramming tutor had fed her that afternoon.

"And what of the other? The Portuguese?"

"He was not treated."

Under other circumstances the implications might have chilled Nagaoka. Instead he asked, "Why did you not accept my sacrifice? I was ready to let go of life."

MUSASHI did not answer. He took stock of himself. His eyeballs burned. He felt flushed, as if from too much sun. There was an asthmatic rattle to his breathing. The cut down the side of his face throbbed. If oxygen starvation had done permanent damage to his brain he was unaware of it. *But then, I wouldn't be, would I?* The answer did not interest him much. It was as though he were tired of always questioning himself.

"*Sensei,* please forgive me."

He cocked an eyebrow at the cee-squared panel. He was in his *shoin,* he realized.

"You are my only friend. You are my family. The others treat me as an experiment. A thing. Oh, that's changed some, after what has happened. Some of them treat me as a god—or a devil. But you are the only one to whom I am a *person.* I don't want to lose you.

"But if you wish, I can provide the means—" She wouldn't finish.

He shut his eyes, let himself be aware of the yellowish light pressing through the lids. "You will have to lose me someday, child. That's the way the world is. Everything passes, but you and your brother and old Inja-san. But now . . . for me to die after I missed my big exit would be rather anticlimactic, would it not?"

He sighed again. "I shall miss *Beneath The Waves Off Kanagawa.*"

"I am sorry, *sensei.* It acquired a random vector when it was blown out of the compartment. Not even I have the power to calculate where it might have gone. And if I could, the delta-vee required to recover it—"

He shook his head. "Never mind." He wondered if it might possibly reenter atmosphere, and imagined it falling like a burning leaf, a brief bright glow, fading without trace. He had no idea if that was possible, had no idea of the physics involved. But it would be so *right.*

"I can obtain another print, *sensei.*"

"No, MUSASHI-san, thank you. Let it go. It's just a picture of the Floating World." ●

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THE SMILE OF THE CHIPPER

art: John M. Barrick

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by Isaac Asimov

Johnson was reminiscing in the way old men do and I had been warned he would talk about chippers—those peculiar people who flashed across the business scene for a generation at the beginning of this twenty-first century of ours. Still, I had had a good meal at his expense and I was ready to listen.

And, as it happened, it was the first word out of his mouth. "Chippers," he said, "were just about unregulated in those days. Nowadays, their use is so controlled no one can get any good out of them, but back a ways—One of them made this company the ten billion dollar concern it now is. I picked him, you know."

I said, "They didn't last long, I'm told."

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"Not in those days. They burned out. When you add microchips at key points in the nervous system, then in ten years at the most, the wiring burns out, so to speak. Then they retired—a little vacant-minded, you know."

"I wonder anyone submitted to it."

"Well, all the idealists were horrified, of course, and that's why the regulating came in, but it wasn't that bad for the chippers. Only certain people could make use of the microchips—about eighty percent of them males, for some reason—and, for the time they were active, they lived the lives of shipping magnates. Afterward, they always received the best of care. It was no different from top-ranking athletes, after all; ten years of active early life, and then retirement."

Johnson sipped at his drink. "An unregulated chipper could influence other people's emotions, you know, if they were chipped just right and had talent. They could make judgments on the basis of what they sensed in other minds and they could strengthen some of the judgments competitors were making, or weaken them—for the good of the home company. It wasn't unfair. Other companies had their own chippers doing the same thing." He sighed. "Now that sort of thing is illegal. Too bad."

I said, diffidently, "I've heard that illegal chipping is still done."

Johnson grunted and said, "No comment."

I let that go, and he went on, "But even thirty years ago, things were still wide open. Our company was just an insignificant item in the global economy, but we had located two chippers who were willing to work for us."

"Two?" I had never heard *that* before.

Johnson looked at me slyly. "Yes, we managed that. It's not widely known in the outside world, but it came down to clever recruiting and it was slightly—just a touch—illegal, even then. Of course, we couldn't hire them both. Getting two chippers to work together is impossible. They're like chess grandmasters, I suppose. Put them in the same room and they would automatically challenge each other. They would compete continually, each trying to influence and confute the other. They wouldn't stop—*couldn't,* actually—and they would burn each other out in six months. Several companies found that out, to their great cost, when chippers first came into use."

"I can imagine," I murmured.

"So since we couldn't have both, and could only take one, we wanted the more powerful one, obviously, and that could only be determined by pitting them against each other, without letting them ruin each other. I was given the job, and it was made quite clear that if I picked the one who, in the end, turned out to be inadequate, that would be my end, too."

"How did you go about it, sir?" I knew he had succeeded, of course. A

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person can't become Chairman of the Board of a world-class firm for nothing.

Johnson said, "I had to improvise. I investigated each separately first. The two were known by their code-letters, by the way. In those days, their true identities had to be hidden. A chipper known to be a chipper was half-useless. They were C-12 and F-71 in our records. Both were in their late twenties. C-12 was unattached; F-71 was engaged to be married."

"Married?" I said, a little surprised.

"Certainly. Chippers are human, and male chippers are much sought after by women. They're sure to be rich and, when they retire, their fortunes are usually under the control of their wives. It's a good deal for a young woman. —So I brought them together, *with* F-71's fiancée. I hoped earnestly she would be good-looking, and she was. Meeting her was almost like a physical blow to me. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, tall, dark-eyed, a marvelous figure and rather more than a hint of smoldering sexuality."

Johnson seemed lost in thought for a moment, then he continued. "I tell you I had a strong urge to try to win the woman for myself but it was not likely that anyone who had a chipper would transfer herself to a mere junior executive, which is what I was in those days. To transfer herself to another chipper would be something else—and I could see that C-12 was as affected as I was. He could *not* keep his eyes off her. So I just let things develop to see who ended with the young woman."

"And who did, sir?" I asked.

"It took two days of intense mental conflict. They must each have peeled a month off their working lives, but the young lady walked off with C-12 as her new fiancé."

"Ah, so you chose C-12 as the firm chipper."

Johnson stared at me with disdain. "Are you mad? I did no such thing. I chose F-71, of course. We placed C-12 with a small subsidiary of ours. He'd be no good to anyone else, since we knew him, you see."

"But did I miss something? F-71 lost his fiancée and C-12 gained her. Surely C-12 was the superior."

"Was he? Chippers show no emotion in a case like this; no obvious emotion. It is necessary for business purposes for chippers to hide their powers so that the pokerface is a professional necessity for them. But I was watching closely—my own job was at stake—and, as C-12 walked off with the woman, I noticed a small smile on F-71's lips and it seemed to me there was the glitter of victory in his eyes."

"But he lost his fiancée."

"Doesn't it occur to you he *wanted* to lose her and it would not be easy to pry her loose? He had to work on C-12 to want her and on the woman

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to want to be wanted—and he did it. He won."

I thought about that. "But how could you have been sure? If the woman was as good-looking as you say she was—if she was smoldering so with sexuality, surely F-71 would have wanted to keep her."

"But F-71 was making her seem desirable," said Johnson, grimly. "He aimed at C-12, of course, but with such power that the overflow was sufficient to affect me drastically. After it was all over and C-12 was walking away with her, I was no longer under the influence and I could see there was something hard and overblown about her—a kind of unlovely and predatory gleam in her eye.

"So I chose F-71 at once and he was all we could want. The firm is now where you see it is, and I am Chairman of the Board." ●

TURNING INTO ANIMALS

You don't know why
you're doing this.
Only that it must be done.
The earliest things matter now.
No embarrassment,
instinct rules
and you're glad.
Smells curl into your mouths;
you swallow.
You touch
and fear boils away
like snow on the hearth.
You look into the fire;
your faces burn.
Words fail then.
Wet sounds bubble in your throats.
Later you will ask
who were we?
Now you bend
to the rhythms of your blood.

—James Patrick Kelly

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KADDISH

by Jack Dann

Jack Dann's works-in-progress include a major new historical novel for Doubleday Bantam and, together with co-author Jack C. Haldeman III, a science fiction novel entitled *High Steel* for Tor Books. *In the Fields of Fire*, an anthology of short stories about Vietnam edited by Mr. Dann and his wife, Jeanne Van Buren Dann, was a recent finalist for the World Fantasy Award.

art: Nicholas Jainschigg

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What ails you, O sea, that you flee?

—Psalm of Hallel

Nathan sat with the other men in the small prayer-room of the synagogue. It was 6:40 in the morning. One of the three professors who taught Hebrew Studies at the university was at the bema, the altar, leading the prayers. His voice intoned the Hebrew and Aramaic words; it was like a cold stream running and splashing over ice. Nathan didn't understand Hebrew, although he could read a little, enough to say the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, in a halting fashion.

But everything was rushed here in this place of prayer, everyone rocking back and forth and flipping quickly through the well-thumbed pages in the black siddur prayer books. Nathan couldn't keep up with the other men, even when he read and scanned the prayers in English. Young boys in jeans and designer T-shirts prayed ferociously beside their middle-aged fathers, as if trying to outdo them, although it was the old men who always finished first and had time to talk football while the others caught up. Only the rabbi with his well-kept beard and embroidered yarmulke sat motionless before the congregation, his white linen prayer shawl wrapped threateningly around him like a shroud, as if to emphasize that he held the secret knowledge and faith that Nathan could not find.

Nathan stared into his siddur and prayed with the others.

He was the Saracen in the temple, an infidel wearing prayer shawl and phylacteries.

A shoe-polish black leather frontlet containing a tiny inscribed parchment pressed against Nathan's forehead, another was held tight to his biceps by a long strap that wound like a snake around his left arm to circle his middle finger three times. But the flaming words of God contained in the phylacteries did not seem to make the synaptic connection into his blood and brain and sinew. Nevertheless, he intoned the words of the prayers, stood up, bowed, said the kaddish, and then another kaddish, and he remembered all the things he should have said to his wife and son before they died. He remembered his omissions and commissions, which could not be undone. It was too late even for tears, for he was as hollow as a winter gourd.

And Nathan realized that he was already dead.

A shade that had somehow insinuated himself into this congregation.

But then the service was over. The congregants hurriedly folded their prayer-shawls and wound the leather straps around their phylacteries, for it was 7:45, and they had to get to work. Nathan followed suit, but he felt like an automaton, a simulacrum of himself, a dead thing trying to infiltrate the routines and rituals of the living.

He left the synagogue with the other men. He had an early-morning

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appointment with an old client who insisted on turning over his substantial portfolio again; the old man had, in effect, been paying Nathan's mortgage for years.

But as Nathan drove his Mercedes coupe down A1A, which was the more picturesque and less direct route to his office in downtown Fort Lauderdale, he suddenly realized that he couldn't go through with it. He couldn't spend another day going through the motions of dictating to his secretary, counseling clients, staring into the electron darkness of a CRT screen, and pretending that life goes on.

He simply couldn't do it. . . .

He made a U-turn, and drove back home to Lighthouse Point. The ocean was now to his right, an expanse of emerald and tourmaline. It brought to mind memories of family outings on the public Lauderdale beaches when his son Michael was a toddler and wore braces to straighten out a birth defect. He remembered first making love to his wife Helen on the beach. The immensity of the clear, star-filled sky and the dark, unfathomable ocean had frightened her, and afterward she had cried in his arms as she looked out at the sea.

But as Nathan drove past the art-deco style pink cathedral, which was a Lighthouse Point landmark, he realized that he couldn't go home either. How was he going to face the myriad memories inhering in the furniture, bric-a-brac, and framed photographs . . . the memories that seemed to perspire from the very walls themselves? Helen and Michael would only whisper to him again. He would hear all the old arguments and secret conversations, barely audible but there nevertheless, over the susurration of the air conditioner. . . .

He parked his car in the circular driveway of his red-roofed, white stucco home and crossed the street to his neighbor's yard, which had direct frontage on the intercoastal.

He was, after all, already a shade; he had only to make a proper passage into the next world.

And with the same calm, directed purpose that had served him so well in business over the years, Nathan borrowed his neighbor's hundred thousand dollar "cigarette" speedboat and steered it out to sea to find God.

He piloted the glossy green bullet through the intercoastals, motoring slowly, for police patrolled the quiet canals in search of offenders who would dare to churn the oily, mirrored waters into foam and froth. Yachts and sailboats gently tilted and rolled in their marinas, a gas station attendant with a red scarf around his neck leaned against an Esso gas pump that abutted a wide-planked dock where petroleum drippings shiv-

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ered like rainbows caught in the wood, and the waterside pools and sun decks of the pastel-painted, expensive homes were empty.

Nathan smelled the bacon and coffee and gasoline, but could hear and feel only the thrumming of the twin engines of the speedboat. The bow reminded him of the hood of an old Lincoln he had loved: expansive and curved and storeroom shiny.

As Nathan turned out of the intercoastal and into the terrifying turquoise abyss of the open sea, he felt that he had escaped the bondage that had been his life.

The calm rolling surface of the sea had become time itself. Time was no longer insubstantial and ineffable; it was a surface that could be navigated. And Nathan could steer this roaring twin-engined speedboat forward toward destiny and death, or he could return to the past . . . to any or all of the events of his life that floated atop the flowing surface of his life like plankton.

Nathan was finally the engine of his soul.

He opened the throttle, and the "cigarette" seemed to lift out of the water, which slid past underneath like oil, sparkling green and blue in the brilliance of morning.

Dressed in a herringbone blue suit of continental cut, starched white shirt with rounded french cuffs, and maroon striped tie worked into a Windsor knot, he sat straight as a die before the enamel control console of tachometers, clutches, oil-pressure and fuel gauges, compass, wheel, and throttles.

He felt a quiet, almost patrician joy. He had conquered time and space and pain and fear.

He didn't care about fuel.

His only direction was the eternal horizon ahead.

It all changed when the engines gave out, coughing and sputtering into a final silence like bad lungs taking a last glottal breath. Nathan felt the constriction of the tight collar of his silk shirt; he was wet with perspiration. The sun burned into his face and eyes, blinding him with white light turned red behind closed eyelids, and wrenching him awake. It was as if he had been dreaming, sleepwalking through all the aching, guilt-ridden days since the death of his family three months ago today.

He loosened his tie, tore open his collar. He felt short of breath. It was blisteringly hot, and there was no protection from the sun in the cigarette speedboat. He pulled off his jacket. He was breathing hard, hyperventilating, thinking that he must somehow get back to shore. What have I done? he asked himself, incredulous. He felt feverish, hot then cold, and his teeth were chattering.

The waves slapped against the hull, which bobbed up and down and

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to the left and right; and Nathan could *feel* the sea pulling him toward death and its handmaiden of unbearable revelation.

He looked behind him, but there was not a shadow of land. Just open sea, liquid turquoise hills descending and rising. He tried to start the engines, but they wouldn't catch. The console lights dimmed from the drainage of power. He looked in the sidewells for extra fuel and oars but found only canvas, an opened package of plastic cups, and a very good brand of unblended scotch. No first-aid kit, no flares, for his neighbor was not fastidious, nor did he ever take the boat out of the intercoastal. This was probably the first time that the throttle had ever been turned to full. The boat was a status-symbol, nothing more.

The compass read East, which was impossible, for if that were so, he would see land.

But east was the direction of God.

And the sea had become a manifestation of that direction.

The swells were higher now, and the boat rose and dipped, each time being pulled farther out, and the hours passed like days, and Nathan felt hungry and thirsty and frightened.

He thought he saw something on the horizon and stood up as best he could in the boat; he held tight to the chrome pillar of the windshield, and yes, there *was* something out there. A ship, a tanker, perhaps. He shouted into the soughing silence of the sea, but it was futile. It was as if he were being hidden in the troughs of the waves.

Hours later, when he was cried out and hoarse, cowed by the infinities of sea and sky and the desiccating heat of the sun, which had transformed itself into a blinding, pounding headache, he turned around. As if he could hide in his own shadow from the sun.

And as if turned to stone, he gazed into the past.

But not far into the past.

Not far enough to savor a moment of comfort before the tsunamis of guilt and grief.

Nathan returns to the morning that burns him still. He is shaving, his face lathered with soap from his chipped shaving mug that had once belonged to his grandfather, when Helen calls him. He can hear the muffled argument that has been going on downstairs between his wife and son, but he ignores it for as long as he can.

He simply can't face any more tension.

"Nathan!" Helen shouts, pushing the bathroom door open. "Didn't you hear me calling you?" She is a tiny woman, slender and heart-faced, with long, thick brown hair. She does not look thirty-eight, although Nathan, who is considered good-looking, if not handsome, because of his weathered, broad-featured face and shock of gray hair, looks every one of his

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forty years. "Michael's late for school again," she says. "He's missed the bus. And when I told him I'd take him to school, he told me to fuck off."

"That's *not* what I said." Michael appears behind his mother; he is sixteen and dressed in baggy slacks and a carefully torn T-shirt. His hair is swept back from his forehead and sprayed to a laquered shine. He looks like his mother, and has her temperament. Flushed with anger and frustration, he says, "I told her I'd take the next bus, which I could have taken, if she would have let me out of the house to catch it. Now it's too late."

"Your mother said she'd take you to school."

"I don't want her taking me to school. I can't stand her."

"Well, I am taking you," Helen said, "and as a consequence for what you said to me, you're grounded this weekend."

"I didn't say *anything* to you!"

"Nathan," she said, turning to him, "he's lying again. He told me to fuck myself."

"I am not lying," Michael shouts. "And I didn't say 'fuck yourself,' I said 'fuck it' because nobody can talk sense to you. All you can do is scream and ground me every five minutes. I already bought tickets to The Flack concert," he says to Nathan, "and I'm going, whether she likes it or not. I've tried to be nice to her all week, but it's impossible."

Nathan wipes the soap from his face and, trying to remain calm, says, "We've talked about using that kind of language to your mother. It's got to stop. . . ."

But there can be no quiet and rational resolve, for the family dynamics inevitably overpower him.

The argument gains momentum.

Michael is swearing and crying in frustration. Helen finally grabs him by his T-shirt and pushes him against the hallway wall. "I've got to get to work, and you *are* coming with me. Damn you!"

Michael tries to pull away from her, but she won't let him go. He pushes her, defensively, throwing her off balance.

Seeing that, Nathan shouts, "God damn you both," and rushes into the hallway. Everything is out of control now; it is all visceral response.

He pushes Helen aside and slaps Michael hard on the side of his face.

Helen screams, "I've told you *never* to strike him."

But before Nathan can recover and bring himself to apologize, they are out of the house.

By sunset the sky was the color of dull metal and filled with storm-clouds. Only in the west did the sun bleed through the gray as it settled into the sea, which was pellucid and unnaturally clear. Sheet lightning

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shot through the massive cloud countries as the temperature dropped, and the humidity seemed to roll off the sea like mist, soon to be rain.

Nathan's fever thoughts burned like his red, broken skin. There was no food, no water to drink, just the slight smell of gasoline and the salty tang of the sea. It became dark, and still Nathan sat and stared into the transparent depths of the sea, as if he were looking for something he had lost. Sometime during the agony of afternoon, he had stopped thinking about rescue. That idea had become as distant as a childhood dream.

Now, his mind raw from the sun, he watched and waited, and as expected, something was swimming up from the depths. A vague shape rose through veils of green darkness, followed by others. Fins broke the surface of the water, and twenty foot thresher sharks circled the boat. Then other fish appeared just below the surface: marlin and seabass, dolphin and barracuda, all circling, until the sea in all directions was filled with all manner of fish, from the smallest foureye to sixty foot star-speckled whale sharks.

It grew dark, and the water was lit now by moonlight and pocked by the rain that began to fall. The rain was cold on Nathan's raw skin, and it looked as if each droplet was illuminated by its own silvery light.

And as the rain struck the water, the fish became frenzied. They began to tear at each other, as if in a feeding madness. Huge white sharks snapped and gored the smaller tiger and mako sharks, while the barracuda cut sailfish and cobia and tarpon into bloody gobbets of meat.

Nathan could feel them smashing against the hull like hammers, and the ocean began to boil with the carnage.

Then, as if in concert, the storm exploded in claps and rolls of thunder and torrents of rain; and the ocean responded with high waves that almost turned over the speedboat. Reeking fish slammed into the cigarette's cockpit, as if thrown from the sky, splashing Nathan with blood and entrails. Lightning veined the moon, magnified by the atmosphere into a lifeless sun.

Nathan huddled inside the boat, pressing his legs and back against the fiberglass to prevent himself from being flung into the sea. The rain was cold, as was the seawater spraying over him, yet each raindrop and salty spindrift burned him. He raised his head one last time to look around, only to see that it was raining fire. The ocean was illuminated, as if by blue flame; and the sky glowed like cinders.

The sea was a bloodbath.

And as his heart stopped and his breath caught in his throat—

Nathan sits behind his desk in his three-windowed, mahogany-paneled office. He is looking at the rouged and concerned face of a wealthy dowager client as he learns of the death of his wife and son.

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He listens to the voice on the phone describing the accident and feels himself freezing into shock. He can only stare at the dowager's huge emerald earrings, as if the green stones are tiny tablets: the emerald grimoires of Solomon, which contain all the answers to the mysteries of life and death and guilt and anger.

Dawn revealed the bloated bodies and remains of thousands of fish that floated like gray driftwood on the calm swells of the ocean. A few cumulus clouds drifted across the sky, as if to separate the chilly perfection of Heaven from the ruin below. Nathan awakened with a jolt, as if from a nightmare, only to find that all was as it had been. Repelled, he threw an eel and an ugly, spiny sargassum fish back into the sea.

He felt nauseated, but he had had the dry heaves during the night; there was nothing left in his stomach to expel. He had even tried to eat the fish that had landed in the cockpit of the speedboat, but the reek was so great that he couldn't manage to bite into the putrescent flesh. He was thirsty, but the sea was salt. Here was food and water all around him, yet he was starving and dehydrated. And naked. His clothes were not anywhere to be seen. Perhaps he had torn them off to relieve his burning skin. Nathan's flesh seemed to be pulling away from his bones. It was so scorched that his shoulders and face and arms were bleeding.

The empty bottle of scotch rolled on the fiberglass floor of the speedboat, catching the sun.

The hours passed. Nathan tried not to look at the sea, filled with the miles of decaying flesh and stink, but he could not stare into the sky forever. He surveyed the countries of flesh and sea around him, a sargasso mire that seemed endless, and he noticed something shiny bobbing in the water. It was the silver breastplate of a satin Torah covering. He scanned the ocean and found a Torah parchment floating, its Hebrew letters black mirrors reflecting the sun and sky above. Bits and pieces of the ark floated in the debris. Open prayer books seemed to move beneath the surface of the water like manta rays, their black covers dull and the golden letters washed away.

But the holy objects and bloody flesh seemed to form letters, signs, and portents that Nathan could not read. Yet when he reached for a prayer book floating beside the hull, it began to sink into the dark, shadowed water, to become a distant memory. As Nathan looked into the water that was as clear and still as the past, he remembered: His son, dressed in a new black suit, leading the Shacharis service at his bar mitzvah; his own wedding in a rundown, glot-kosher hotel in Miami Beach, Helen nervous around his eighty-year-old aunts, who insisted that she step on Nathan's foot for luck when he ceremoniously crushed the wineglass wrapped in a napkin; Helen taking him in her arms to tell him that his

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father had died; and the arguments and lovemaking and Sabbath candles; Michael stealing the family car, introducing him to his first "serious" girlfriend, who seemed afraid to look up from her plate at the dinner table. . . .

All the tiny realizations of changes and transitions seemed to be floating, objects on the sea.

But like the prayer book, the fish and carrion and scrolls and salt-stained pieces of the holy Ark began to sink; and Nathan was left staring into the empty green-hazed depths, as if he were looking once again into the green stone of Solomon.

The sea was like a mirror, so still and perfect that it seemed to harden into emerald. It *was* time itself, and in it he could see his own reflection.

If only Nathan could pass through its face.

He could see himself.

He could see. . . .

Nathan sat with the other men in the small prayer-room of the synagogue and felt the divine presence. The ancient kabbalists called it the *Shekhinah,* the bride of God.

It was 6:40 in the morning, and Nathan couldn't discern what was different, but he felt *something*. The morning light was like blue smoke diffusing through the high, narrow stained-glass windows. Dust motes danced in the air, shivering in the air-conditioned morning. Nathan put on his tallit and phylacteries and recited the blessing and the *Akeidah* and the *Shema* and other supplications. The other men sat beside him and behind him and prayed as they did every morning. Their smells and clothes were the same, and the prayers were almost hypnotic in their monotonous intonation. A young man hummed nasally, as was his habit, throughout the prayers. One of the three professors who taught Hebrew Studies at the university was at the bema, leading the prayers. His voice intoned the Hebrew and Aramaic words.

And Nathan felt the presence of his dead son and wife sitting beside him.

He couldn't *see* them, not with the same eyes that stared straight ahead at the red satin curtains of the holy ark; but he sensed their presence nevertheless. As he prayed, he could hear Michael's voice . . . his own voice.

Young men of Michael's age paced nervously around the room; they were wrapped protectively in their prayer-shawls, and the light seemed to cling to them.

Perhaps they sensed the *Shekhinah,* too.

Helen leaned against him. She was a shadow, barely palpable, but Nathan *knew* it was his wife.

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Her body was the silk of his prayer shawl, her breath was Sabbath spices, and her fingers were as cool as the leather frontlets on his arm and forehead. As she whispered to him, his past became as concentrated as old liquors.

His life became an instant of unbearable fire, blinding him. But she released him, freed him from his immolating guilt, as the prayers for the dead drifted and curled through the morning light like smoke, then fell to rest like ashes.

Then the service was over and the *Shekhinah* evaporated, its holy presence melting like snow in the furnace of another Florida morning. The congregants, seemingly deaf and blind to the miracle that had swept past them, hurriedly folded their prayer-shawls and wound the leather straps around their phylacteries, for it was 7:45, and they had to get to work.

Nathan left the synagogue with the other men. He had an early-morning appointment with an old client. As he drove his Mercedes coupe down A1A, which was the more picturesque and less direct route to his office in downtown Fort Lauderdale, he passed the resorts and grand hotels, the restaurants and seedy diners, and the endless lots of kitsch motels with neon signs in their plate glass windows and hosts of plastic pink flamingos on their lawns.

He gazed out at the ocean. It was an expanse of emerald and tourmaline. Except for the whitecaps, which were long fingers gently pulling at the sand, the sea was quiet. Nathan turned off the air-conditioner and pressed the toggles on his armrest to open all the windows.

The humidity rushed in with the pungent smell of brine, and Nathan felt his face grow wet with perspiration and tears.

Then he detoured back to the highway.

The electric windows glided up, shutting out the world; the hum of the air-conditioner muffled the honking of the early morning rush hour combatants; and the news announcer on the radio reported on the rescue of a businessman naked and adrift on a speedboat near Miami.

But even now, Nathan could sense the *Shekhinah.*

He could hear his son's voice and feel the cool, gentle touch of Helen's fingers upon his arms and perspiring forehead.

Yet in the reflection of the curving, tinted windshield, he could still see himself burning on the sea. ●

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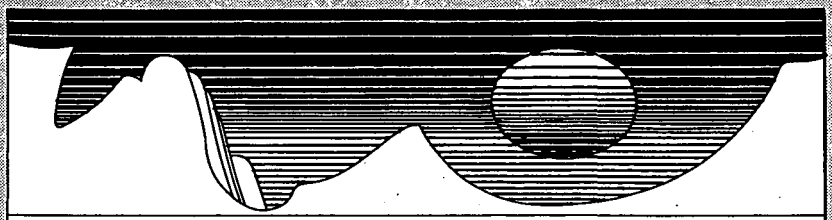

REFERENTS
Maiden Cliff, 7/16/87

As if moving vertically through geologic time,
we climbed to a node so rounded by weather
that intruded white veins of quartz raised
in age lines through the granite at our feet.
Karol sectioned our apples, I talked plate tectonics.
Timalyne tossed her pale spindly cores and
watched them tumble end over end into extinction.
In the valley a long mile further below, an ice blue lake
sparkled like the half moon flecks in a shard
of original stone worn to a pitted sheen by the eons.
To the south and flat as slate, the primal ocean
pushed its grey soup against the curve of shore.
To the west stood ragged mountains of conifers
reseeding themselves in a cycle older than man.
We joked and snapped pictures and possessed all
the country we saw, regardless of the centuries.
Our hunger rekindled in the afternoon heat,
and in an eroded bowl that canted gently down
and held a slip of recent soil, as such things are,
we stained our teeth with ripe blueberries.
We filled our bags until dusk,
until the only referents we knew were:
the fog that severed us from the past below;
the fresh moments of waxy fruit on their red stems;
the cooling mass of the planet, ticking toward tomorrow.

—Robert Frazier

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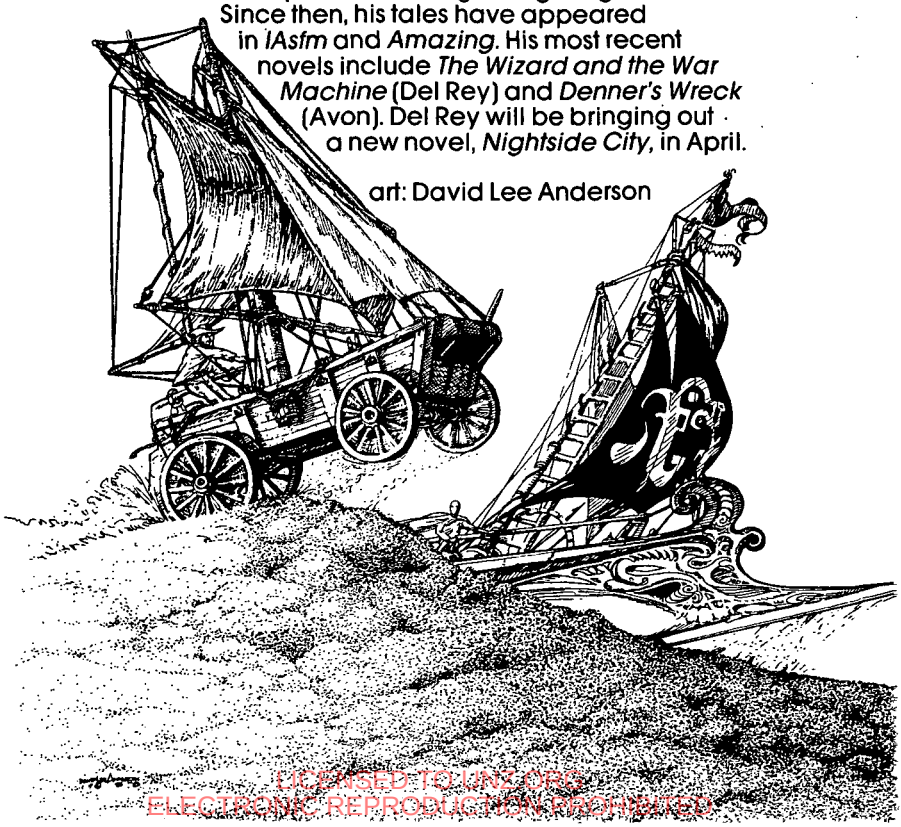
WINDWAGON SMITH AND THE MARTIANS

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

Lawrence Watt-Evans' short fiction first saw publication in gaming magazines. Since then, his tales have appeared in *IAsfm* and *Amazing*. His most recent novels include *The Wizard and the War Machine* (Del Rey) and *Denner's Wreck* (Avon). Del Rey will be bringing out a new novel, *Nightside City*, in April.

art: David Lee Anderson



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I reckon most folks have heard of Thomas Smith, the little sailor from Massachusetts who turned up in Westport, Missouri one day in 1853 aboard the contraption he called a windwagon. He'd rigged himself a deck and a sail and a tiller on top of a wagon, and just about tried to make a prairie schooner into a *real* schooner. Figured on building himself a whole fleet and getting rich, shipping folks and freight to Santa Fe or wherever they might have a mind to go.

Well, as you might have heard, he got some of the folks in Westport to buy stock in his firm, and he built himself a bigger, better windwagon from the ground up, with a mainmast and a mizzen both, and he took his investors out for a test run—and they every one of them got seasick, and scared as the devil at how fast the confounded thing ran, and they all jumped ship and wouldn't have more to do with it. Smith allowed as how the steering might not be completely smooth yet, though the idea was sound, but the folks in Westport just weren't interested.

And last anyone heard, old Windwagon Smith was sailing west across the prairie, looking for braver souls.

That's the last anyone's heard till now, anyways. A good many folks have wondered whatever became of Windwagon Smith, myself amongst them, and I'm pleased to be able to tell the story.

And if you ask how I come to know it, well, I heard it from Smith himself, but that's another story entirely.

Here's the way of it. Back in '53, Smith headed west out of Westport feeling pretty ornery and displeased; he reckoned that the fine men of Westport had just missed the chance of a lifetime, and all over a touch of the collywobbles and a bit of wind. Wasn't any doubt in his mind but he could find braver men somewheres, who would back his company and put all those mule-drawn freight-wagons right out of business. It was just a matter of finding the right people.

So he sailed on, and he stopped now and then and told folks his ideas, and he was plump disconcerted to learn that there wasn't a town he tried that wanted any part of his windwagon.

He missed a lot of towns, too, because the fact was that the steering *was* a mite difficult, and he didn't so much stay on the trail as try to keep somewhere in its general vicinity. He stopped a few times to tinker with it, but the plain truth is that he never did get it right, not so as one man could work it and steer small. After all, the clippers he'd learned on didn't steer with just a tiller, but with the sails as well—tacking and so forth. If Smith had had more men on board, to help work the sails, he might have managed some fine navigation, instead of just aim-and-hope.

After a time, though, he had got most of the way to Santa Fe, but had lost the trail again, and he was sailing out across the desert pretty sure

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that he was a good long way from where he had intended to be, when he noticed that the sand was getting to be awfully red.

The sky was getting darker, too, but there wasn't a cloud anywhere in it, and it wasn't but early afternoon; it just seemed as if the sun had shrunk up some, and the sky had dimmed down from a regular bright blue to a color more like the North Atlantic on a winter morning. The air felt damn near as cold as the North Atlantic, too, and that didn't seem right for daytime in the desert. What's more, Smith suddenly felt sort of light, as if the wind might just blow him right off his own deck, even though it didn't seem to be blowing any harder than before. And he was having a little trouble breathing, like as if he'd got himself up on top of a mountain.

And the sand was *awfully* red, about the color of a boiled lobster.

Well, old Windwagon Smith had read up on the West before he ever left Massachusetts, and he'd never heard of anything like this. He didn't like it a bit, and he took a reef in the sails and slowed down, trying to figure it.

The sand stayed red, and the sky stayed dark, and the air stayed thin and he still felt altogether too damn light on his feet, and he commenced to be seriously worried and furled the sails right up, so that that windwagon of his rolled to a stop in the middle of that red desert.

He threw out the anchor to keep him where he was, and had a time doing it, because although the anchor seemed a fair piece lighter than he remembered, it almost took him with it when he heaved it over. Seemed like he had to be extra careful about everything he did, because even the way his own body moved didn't seem quite right; of course, being a sailor, he could keep his feet just about anywhere, so he got by. He might have thought he was dreaming if he hadn't been the level-headed sort he was, and proud of his plain sense to know whether he was awake or asleep.

Just to be sure, though, he pinched himself a few times, and the red marks that left pretty much convinced him he was awake.

He stood on the deck and looked about, and all he saw was that red, red sand, stretching clear to the horizon whichever way he cared to look. The horizon looked a shade close in, at that; wasn't anything quite what it ought to be.

He didn't like that a bit. He climbed up aloft, to the crow's nest up above the main topsail, and he looked about again.

This time, when he looked to what he reckoned was west, he saw something move, something that was blue against the blue of the sky, so he couldn't make out just what it was.

It was coming his way, though, so he figured he'd just let it come, and take a closer look when he could.

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But he wasn't about to let it come on him unprepared. After all, there were still plenty of wild Indians around, and white men who were just as wild without any of the excuses the Indians had, seeing as how they hadn't had their land stolen, or their women either, nor their hunting ruined. They could be just as wild as Indians, all the same.

He slid down the forestay and went below, and when he mounted back to the maintop he had a sixgun on his belt and a rifle in his hand.

By now the blue thing was closer, and he got a good clear look at it, and he damn near dropped his rifle, because it was a ship, a sand ship, and it was sailing over the desert right toward him.

And what's more, there were three more right behind it, all of them tall and graceful, with blue sails the color of that dark sky. Proud as he was of his work, old Windwagon had to admit that the ugliest of the four was a damn sight better-looking than his own windwagon had ever been, even before it got all dusty and banged up with use.

They were quieter, too. Fact is, they were near as silent as clouds, where his own windwagon had always rattled and clattered like any other wagon, and creacked and groaned like a ship, as well. All in all, it made a hell of a racket, but these four sand ships didn't make a sound—at least, not that Smith could hear yet, over the wind in the rigging.

He was pretty upset, seeing those four sand ships out there. Here he'd thought he had the only sailing wagon ever built, and then these four come over the horizon—not just one, but four, and any of them enough to burst a clipper captain's heart with envy.

If they were freighters, Smith knew that he wasn't going to get anywhere near as rich as he had figured, up against competition like that. He began to wonder if maybe the folks back in Westport weren't right, but for all the wrong reasons.

The sand ships' hulls were emerald green, and the trim was polished brass or bone white, and above the blue sails they flew pennants, gold and blue and red and green pennants, and they were just about the prettiest thing Smith had ever seen in his life.

He looked at them, and he didn't know what the hell they were doing there or where they'd come from, but they didn't look like anything wild Indians would ride, or anything outlaws would ride, so he just watched as they came sailing up to his own ship—or wagon, or whatever you care to name it.

Three of the sand ships slowed up and stopped a good ways off, but the first one in line came right up next to him.

That one was the biggest and the prettiest, and the only one flying gold pennants. He figured it must belong to the boss of the bunch, the commodore or whatsoever he might be called.

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"Ahoy!" Smith shouted.

He could see people on the deck of the sand ship, three of them, but he couldn't make out any faces, and none of them answered his hail. They were dressed in robes, which made him wonder if maybe they weren't Indians after all, or Mexicans.

"Ahoy!" he called again.

"Mr. Smith," one of them called back, almost like he was singing, "Come down where we can speak more easily."

Smith thought about that, and noticed that none of them had any guns that he could see, and decided to risk it. He climbed down, with his rifle, and he came over to the rail, where he could have reached out and touched the sand ship if he stretched a little.

He was already there when he realized that the strangers had called him by his right name.

Before he could think that over, the stranger who had called him said, "Mr. Smith, we have brought you here because we admire your machine."

Smith looked at the strangers, and at the great soaring masts and dark blue sails, and at the shiny brass and the sleek green hull, and he didn't believe a word of it. Anyone who had a ship like that one had no reason to admire his windwagon. He'd been mighty proud of it until a few minutes ago, but he could see now that it wasn't much by comparison.

Well, he figured, the strangers were being polite. He appreciated that. "Thanks," he said. "That's a sweet ship you have there, yourself."

While he was saying that, he noticed that the reason he hadn't been able to make out faces was that the strangers were all wearing masks, shiny masks that looked like pure silver, with lips that looked like rubies. The eyes that showed through were yellow, almost like cat's eyes, and Smith wasn't too happy about seeing that. The masks looked like something Indians might wear, but he'd never heard of any Indians like these.

He said, "By the way, I'd be mighty obliged if you could tell me where I am; I lost my bearings some time back, and it seems as if I might be a bit off course."

He couldn't see which of the strangers it was that spoke, what with the masks, but one of them said, "My apologies, Mr. Smith. It was we who brought you here. You are on Mars."

"Mars?" Smith asked. He wasn't sure just how to take this. "You mean Mars, Pennsylvania? Down the road a piece from Zelienople?" He didn't see any way he could have wound up there, and he'd never heard tell that Pennsylvania had any flat red deserts, but that was one of the two places he'd ever heard of called Mars, and he didn't care to think about the other one much.

"No," the stranger said, "The planet Mars. We transported your ex-

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cellent craft here by means that I am unable to explain, so that I might offer you a challenge."

Now, Smith knew something about the planets, because any sailor does if he takes an interest in navigation, and he knew that Mars was sort of reddish, and the red sand would account for that nicely. He looked up at that shrunken sun and that dark blue sky, and then at those sand ships like nothing on Earth, and decided that one of three things had happened.

Either he'd gone completely mad without noticing it, and was imagining all this, which didn't bear thinking about but which surely fit the facts best of all; or somebody was playing one hell of a practical joke on him, which he didn't have any idea how it was being done; or the stranger was telling the truth. For the sake of argument, he decided he'd figure on that last one, because the second seemed plumb unlikely and the first wasn't anything he could figure on, never having been mad before and not knowing just how it might work. Besides, he'd simply never judged himself for the sort of fellow that might go mad, and he wasn't in any hurry to change his mind on that account.

So he figured the stranger was telling the truth. Whether it was magic, or some sort of scientific trick, he didn't know, but he reckoned he really was on Mars.

And he didn't figure he'd ever find his way back to Earth by himself.

"What sort of a challenge?" he asked.

He sort of thought he saw the middle stranger smile behind his silver mask.

"I," the middle stranger said, "am Moohay Nillay, and I am the champion yachtsman of all Teer, as we call our planet." Smith wasn't any too sure of those names, so I may have them wrong. "I have the finest sand ship ever built, and in it I have raced every challenger that my world provided, and I have defeated them all. Yet it was not enough; I grew bored, and desired a new challenge, and sought elsewhere for competitors who could race against me."

Smith began to see where this was leading, but he just smiled and said, "Is that so?"

"Indeed it is, Mr. Smith. Unfortunately, our two worlds are the only two in this system bearing intelligent life, and your world has not produced many craft that will sail on sand. I am not interested in sailing upon water—our planet no longer has any seas, and I find the canals too limiting. I might perhaps find better sport on the seas of your planet, but the means by which I drew you here will not send me to Earth. I have been forced to wait, to search endlessly for someone on your planet who would see the obvious value of sailing the plains. To date, you are only the second I have discovered. The first was a man by the name of

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Shard, Captain Shard of the *Desperate Lark,* who fitted his sea-going ship with wheels in order to elude pursuit; I drew him here, and easily defeated his clumsy contrivance. I hope that you, Mr. Smith, will provide a greater test."

"Well, I hope I will, Mr. Nillay. I'd be glad to race you." Smith didn't really think he had much of a chance against those sleek ships, but he figured that it wouldn't hurt to try, and that if he were a good loser, Mr. Nillay might send him back to Earth.

And of course, there was always the chance that his horse sense and Yankee ingenuity might just give him a chance against this smooth-talking Martian braggart.

Well, to make a long story a trifle less tiresome, Smith and the Martian agreed on the ground rules for their little competition. They would race due south, to the edge of a canal—Smith took the Martian's word for just where this canal was, since of course he didn't know a damn thing about Martian geography. Whoever got there first, and dropped a pebble into the canal without setting foot on the ground, would win the race.

The Martian figured it at about a two-day race, if the wind held up, and he gave Smith a pebble to use—except it wasn't so much your every-day pebble as it was a blue jewel of some kind. Smith hadn't ever seen one quite like it.

If Smith won, he was to have a big celebration in the Martian's home town, and would then be sent back to Earth, if he wanted. If he lost, well, he wouldn't get the celebration, but if he had put up enough of a fight, made it a good race and not a rout, the Martian allowed as he might consider maybe sending him back to Earth eventually, just out of the goodness of his heart and as a kind gesture.

Smith didn't like the sound of that, but then he didn't have a whole hell of a lot of choice.

"What about those other folks?" he asked, figuring he needed every advantage he could get. "I'm sailing single-handed, and you've got two crewmen and three other ships."

The Martian allowed as how that might be unfair. Captain Shard had had a full crew for his ship, and Mr. Nillay hadn't been sure whether Smith had anyone else aboard or not, but since he didn't, since he was sailing alone, then Mr. Nillay would sail alone, too. And the other three ships were observers, just there to watch, and to help out if there was trouble.

Smith couldn't much quarrel with that, so after a little more arguing out details, the two ships were lined up at the starting line, Smith's windwagon on the left and the Martian sand ship on the right, both pointed due south.

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One of the other Martians fired a starting pistol that didn't bang, it buzzed like a mad hornet, and the race was on.

Old Windwagon yanked the anchor aboard and started hauling his sheets, piling on every stitch of canvas his two little masts could carry, running back and forth like a lunatic trying to do it all by himself as fast as a full crew, all the while still keeping an eye on his course and making sure he was still headed due south.

Those sails caught the wind, and before he knew it he was rolling south at about the best speed he'd ever laid on, with nothing left to do but stand by the tiller and hope a crosswind didn't tip him right over.

When he was rolling smooth, he glanced back at the Martian sand ship, and it wasn't there. He turned to the stern quarter, and then the beam, and he still didn't see it, but when he looked forward again there it was, a point or two off his starboard bow, that tall blue sail drawing well, full and taut, and that damn Martian yachtsman standing calm as a statue at the tiller.

And although it wasn't easy over the rattling and creaking of his own ship, Smith could hear the Martian sand ship make a weird whistling as it cut through that red sand.

Well, seeing and hearing that made Smith mad. He wasn't about to let some bossy little foreigner in a mask and a nightshirt beat him *that* easily, no sir! He tied down the tiller and ducked below, and began heaving overboard anything he thought he could spare, to lighten the load and help his speed.

Extra spars and sails, his second-best anchor, and the trunk with his clothes went over the after rail; he figured that he could come back and pick them up later if he needed them. When the trunk had hit the ground and burst open, he turned and looked for that Martian prig, and was about as pleased as you can imagine to see that he was closing the gap, gaining steadily on the Martian ship.

Then he hit a bump and went veering off to port, and had to take the tiller again.

Well, the race went on, and on, and Smith gained on the Martian little by little, what seemed like just a few inches every hour, until not long after sunset, while the sky was still pink in the west, the two ships were neck and neck, dead even.

It was about at this point that it first sank in that they weren't going to heave to for the night, and Smith began to do some pretty serious worrying about what might happen if he hit a rock in the dark or some-such disaster as that. He hadn't sailed his windwagon by night before.

He wasn't too worried about missing a night's sleep, as he'd had occasion to do that before, when he was crewing a clipper through a storm in the South Pacific, or spending his money ashore in some all-night

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port, but he *was* worried about cruising ahead under full sail across uncharted desert in the dark.

It helped some when the moons rose, two little ones instead of a big one like ours, but he still spent most of that night in a cold sweat. About his only consolation was that the crazy Martian was near as likely to wreck as he was himself.

It was a mighty cold night, too, and he wrapped himself in all three of the coats he still had and wished he hadn't been so quick to throw his trunk over.

About the time when he was beginning to wonder if maybe the nights on Mars lasted for six months, the way he'd heard tell they did way up north, the sun came up again, and he got a good look at just where he stood.

He'd pulled ahead of the Martian, a good cable's length, maybe more. He smiled through his frozen beard at that; if he just held on, he knew he'd have the race won.

So he *did* hold on, as best he could, but something had changed. The wind had died down some, and maybe the Martian had trimmed his sails a bit better, or the wind had shifted a trifle, but by the middle of the afternoon Windwagon saw that he wasn't gaining any more, and in fact he might just be starting to lose his lead. He wasn't the least bit pleased, let me tell you.

He started thinking about what else he had that he could throw overboard, and he was still puzzling over that when he topped a low rise and got a look at what lay ahead.

He was at the top of the longest damn slope he'd ever seen in his life, a slope that looked pretty near as big as an ocean, and down at the bottom was a big band of green, and in the middle of that green was a strip of blue that Smith knew had to be the canal.

And it was downhill almost the entire way!

The green part wasn't downhill, he could see that, but that long, long red slope was. It wasn't steep, and it wasn't any too smooth, but it was all downhill, and that meant he didn't want to lighten the ship any more at all.

He tied down the tiller again and hung down over the side, pouring on the last of his axle grease so as to make the most out of that hill.

When he got back up on deck and looked back he could see that he was gaining quickly now, pulling farther and farther ahead of the Martian's lighter ship. And that canal was in sight, straight ahead! He figured he just about had it won.

And then the wind, which had been just sort of puffing for a while, up and died completely.

By this time he was rolling hell-for-leather down that hill, at a speed

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he didn't even care to guess, and he didn't stop when the wind died—but that flat stretch of green ahead suddenly looked a hell of a lot wider than it had before.

He pulled up the tiller entirely, to cut the drag; after all, the canal stretched from one horizon to the other, so what did he need to steer for? He could still maneuver the sails if he had to.

He went bouncing and rattling down that hill, thumping and bumping over the loose rocks and the red sand, praying the whole way that he wouldn't tip over. He didn't dare look back to see where the Martian was.

And then he was off the foot of the slope, crunching his way across that green, which was all some sort of viney plant, and his wagon went slower, and slower, and slower, and finally, with one big bounce and a bang, it came to a dead stop—a hundred feet or so from the canal.

Smith looked down at those vines, and then ahead at that blue water, and then back at the Martian sand ship, which wasn't much more than a dark spot on the red horizon behind him, and he just about felt like crying. There wasn't hardly a breath of wind, just the slightest bit of air, enough to flap the sails but not to fill them.

And what's more, the vines under his wheels weren't anywhere near as smooth as the red sand, or the prairie grass back on Earth, and he knew it would take a good hard tug to get the old windwagon started again.

If he could once get it started, he figured that he could just about reach the canal on momentum, without hardly any wind; the vines sort of petered out in about another twenty feet, and from there to the canal the whole way was stone pavement, smooth white stone that wouldn't give his wheels the slightest bit of trouble.

But he needed a good hard push to get off those vines and get moving, and the wind didn't seem to be picking up, and that Martian was still sailing, smooth and graceful, closer and closer down the slope.

And thinking back, Smith recalled that the sand ship had a blade on the front. He hadn't seen much use for it back on the sand, but he could see how it would just cut right through those vines.

He looked about, and saw that a dozen or so Martians, in their robes and masks, were standing nearby, watching silently. Smith wasn't any too eager to let them see him lose. If there was ever a time when he needed some of that old Yankee ingenuity he prided himself on, Smith figured this was it.

He looked down at the vines again, and thought to himself that they looked a good bit like seaweed, back on Earth. He was stuck in the weeds, just like he might be on a sandbar or in shoal water back on Earth.

Well, he knew ways of getting off sandbars. He couldn't figure on any tide to lift him off here, but there were other ways.

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He could kedge off. He hauled up the anchor, and heaved it forward hard as he could—and the way his muscles worked on Mars, that was mighty hard. That anchor landed on the edge of the pavement, and then slid off as he hauled on it, and bit into the soft ground under the vines.

That was about as far as he could haul by hand, though. For one man to move that big a wagon, even on Mars, he needed something more than his own muscle. He took the line around the capstan and began heaving on the pawls.

The line tautened up, and the wagon shifted, and then inched forward—but he couldn't get up any sort of momentum, and he couldn't pull it closer than ten feet from the pavement, where it stopped again, still caught in the vines. When he threw himself on the next pawl the anchor tore free.

He hauled it back on board and reconsidered. Kedging wasn't going to work, that was pretty plain; he couldn't get the anchor to bite on that white stone. So he was still on his sandbar.

He thought back, and back, and tried to remember every trick he'd ever heard for getting a ship off a bar, or freeing a keel caught in the mud.

There was one trick that the men o' war used; they'd fire off a full broadside, and often as not the recoil would pull the ship free.

The problem with that, though, was that he didn't have a broadside to fire. His whole armory was a rifle, two sixguns, and a couple of knives.

He looked back up the slope, and he could see the sand ship's green hull now, and almost thought he could see the sun glinting on Mr. Nillay's silly mask, and he decided that he was damn well going to *make* himself a broadside—or if not a broadside, at least a cannon or two.

The wind picked up a trifle just then, and the sails bellied out a bit, and that gave him hope.

He went below and began rummaging through everything he had, and found himself his heavy iron coffeepot. He took that up on deck, and then broke open every cartridge he had and dumped the charges into the pot; he judged he had better than a pound of powder when he was through. He took his lightest coat, which wasn't really more than a bit of a linsey jacket anyway, and folded that up and stuffed it in on top of the powder for a wad. He put a can of beans on top for shot, and then rolled up a stock certificate from the Westport and Santa Fe Overland Navigation Company and rammed it down the coffeepot's spout for a fuse.

The sails were filling again, but the wagon wasn't moving. Smith figured he still needed that little push. He wedged his contraption under the tiller mounting, and touched a match to the paper.

It seemed to take forever to burn down, but finally it went off with a roar like a bee-stung grizzly bear, and that can of beans shot out spinning

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and burst on the hillside, spraying burnt beans and tin all over the red sand. The coffeepot itself was blown to black flinders.

And the wagon, with a creak, rolled forward onto the pavement. The sails caught the wind, feeble as it was, and with rattling and banging the windwagon clattered across that white stone pavement, toward the canal.

And then it stopped with a bump, about ten feet from the edge, just as the wind died again.

Smith just about jumped up and down and tore at his hair at that. He leaned over the rail and saw that there was a sort of ridge in the pavement, and that his front wheels were smack up against it. He judged it would take near onto a hurricane to get him past that.

He looked back at the Martian sand ship, with its long, graceful bowsprit that would stick out over the canal if it stopped where he was, and he began swearing a blue streak.

He was at the damn canal, after all, and the Martian was just now into the vines, and he wasn't about to be beat like that. He knew that he had to *drop* the pebble, not throw it, so he couldn't just run to the bow and heave it into the water. He was pretty sure that that old Martian would call it a foul, and rightly, if he threw the confounded thing.

And then that old horse sense came through again, and he ran up the rigging to the mainyard, where he grabbed hold of the starboard topsail sheet and untied it, so that it swung free. Hanging onto the bottom end, he climbed back to the mizzenmast, up to the crosstrees, still holding the maintopsail sheet, and dove off, hollering, with the pebble-jewel in his hand.

He swooped down across the deck, lifting his feet to clear it, and then swung out past the bow, up over the canal, and at the top of his swing he let the pebble drop.

It plopped neatly into the water, a foot or two out from the canal wall, while that Martian yachtsman was still fifty feet back. Windwagon Smith let out a shriek of delight as he swung wildly back and forth from the yardarm, and a half-dozen Martians applauded politely.

By the time Smith got himself back down on the deck, Mr. Nillay had got his own ship stopped on the pavement, and he was standing by the edge of the canal, and even with his mask on Smith thought he looked pretty peeved, but there wasn't much he could do.

And then a few minutes later the whole welcoming committee arrived, and they took Smith back to their city, which looked like it was all made out of cut glass and scrimshaw, and they made a big howdy-do over him, and told him he was the new champion sailor of all Mars, the first new champion in nigh onto a hundred years, and they gave him food and

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drink and held a proper celebration, and poor old Mr. Nillay had to go along and watch it all.

Smith enjoyed it well enough, and he had a good old time for a while, but when things quieted down somewhat he went over to Mr. Nillay and stuck out his hand and said, "No hard feelings?"

"No, Mr. Smith," the Martian said, "No hard feelings. However, I feel there is something I must tell you."

Smith didn't like the sound of that. "And what might that be, sir?" He asked.

"Mr. Smith, I have lied to you. I cannot send you back to Earth."

"But you said . . . " Smith began, ready to work himself up into a proper conniption.

"I did not believe I would lose," the Martian interrupted, and his voice still sounded like music, but now it was like a funeral march. "Surely, a sportsman like yourself can understand that."

Well, Smith had to allow as how he *could* understand that, though he couldn't rightly approve. It seemed to him that it was mighty callous to go fetching someone off his home planet like that, when a body couldn't even send him back later.

Old Nillay had to admit that he had been callous, all right, and he damn near groveled, he was so apologetic about it.

But Smith had always been philosophical about these things. It wasn't like he'd had a home anywhere on Earth; all he'd had was his windwagon, and he still had that. And there on Mars he was a hero, and a respected man, where on Earth he hadn't been much more than a crackpot inventor or a common seaman. And the food and drink was good, and the Martian girls were right pretty when they took their masks off, even if they weren't exactly what you'd call white, being more of a brown color, and those big yellow eyes could be mighty attractive. What's more, what with Martians being able to read minds, which they could, that being how they could speak English to Smith, the women could always tell just what a man needed to make him happy, and folks were just generally pretty obliging.

So Windwagon Smith stayed on Mars and lived there happily enough, and he raced his windwagon a few more times, and mostly won, and all this is why he never did turn up in Santa Fe and why he never did find any more investors after that bunch in Westport backed out.

And I know you may be thinking, well, if he stayed on Mars, then how in tarnation did I ever hear this story from him so as I could tell it to you the way I just did; and all that I can say is what I said before.

That's another story entirely. ●

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The United States may not be perfect but . . .

WE COULD DO WORSE

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by Gregory Benford

art: Robert Shore

Everybody in the bar noticed us when we came in. You could see their faces tighten up.

The bartender reached over and put the cover on the free-lunch jar. I caught that even though I was watching the people in the booths.

They knew who we were. You could see the caution come into their eyes. I'm big enough that nobody just glances at me once. You get used to that after a while and then you start to liking it.

"Beer," I said when we got to the mahogany bar. The bartender drew it, looking at me. He let some suds slop over and wiped the glass and stood holding it until I put down a quarter.

"Two," I said. The bartender put the glass in front of me and I pushed it toward Phillips. He let some of the second beer slop out too because he was busy watching my hands. I took the glass with my right and with my left I lifted the cover off the free-lunch jar.

"No," he said.

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I took a sandwich out.

"I'm gonna make like I didn't hear that," I said and bit into the sandwich. It was cheese with some mayonnaise and hadn't been made today.

I tossed the sandwich aside. "Got anything better?"

"Not for you," the bartender said.

"You got your license out where I can read it?"

"You guys is federal. Got no call to want my liquor license."

"Lawyer, huh?" Phillips asked slow and steady. He doesn't say much but people always listen.

The bartender was in pretty good shape, a middle-sized guy with big arm muscles, but he made a mistake then. His hand slid under the bar, watching us both, and I reached over and grabbed his wrist. I yanked his hand up and there was a pistol in it. The hammer was already cocked. Phillips got his fingers between the revolver's hammer and the firing pin. We pulled it out of the bartender's hand easy and I tapped him a light one in the snoot, hardly getting off my stool. He staggered back and Phillips put away the revolver in a coat pocket.

"Guys like you shouldn't have guns," Phillips said. "Get hurt that way."

"You just stand there and look pretty," I said.

"It's Garrett, isn't it?" the barkeep muttered.

"Now don't never you mind," Phillips said.

The rest of the bar was quiet and I turned and gave them a look. "What you expect?" I said loud enough so they could all hear. "Man pulls a gun on you, you take care of him."

A peroxide blonde in a back booth called out, "You bastards!"

"There a back alley here?" I asked the whole room.

Their faces were tight and they didn't know whether to tell me the truth or not.

"Hey, yeah," Phillips said, "sure there's a back door. You 'member, the briefing said so."

He's not too bright. So I used a different way to open them up. "Blondie, you want we ask you some questions? Maybe out in that alley?"

Peroxide looked steady at me for a moment and then looked away. She knew what we'd do to her out there if she made any more noise. Women know those things without your saying.

I turned my back to them and said, "My nickel."

The bartender had stopped his nose from bleeding but he wasn't thinking very well. He just blinked at me.

"Change for the beers," I said. "You can turn on that TV, too."

He fumbled getting the nickel. When the last of the Milton Berle hour came on the bar filled with enough sound so anybody coming in from the

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street wouldn't notice that nobody was talking. They were just watching Phillips and me.

I sipped my beer. Part of our job is to let folks know we're not fooling around any more. Show the flag, kind of.

The Berle show went off and you could smell the tense sweat in the bar. I acted casual, like I didn't care. The government news bulletins were coming on and the bartender started to change channels and I waved him off.

"Time for Lucy," he said. He had gotten some backbone into his voice again.

I smiled at him. "I guess I know what time it is. Let's inform these citizens a li'l."

There was a Schlitz ad with dancing and singing bottles, the king of beers, and then more news. They mentioned the new directives about the state of emergency, but nothing I didn't already know two days ago. Good. No surprises.

"Let's have Lucy!" somebody yelled behind me.

I turned around but nobody said anything more. "You'd maybe like watchin' the convention?" I said.

Nobody spoke. So I grinned and said, "Maybe you patriots could learn somethin' that way."

I laughed a little and gestured to the bartender. He spun the dial and there was the Republican convention, warming up. Cronkite talking over the background noise.

"Somethin', huh?" I said to Phillips. "Not like four years ago."

"Don't matter that much," Phillips said. He watched the door while I kept an eye on the crowd.

"You kiddin'? Why, that goddamn Eisenhower almost took the nomination away from Taft last time. Hadn't been for Nixon deliverin' the California delegation to old man Taft, that pinko general coulda won."

"So?" Phillips sipped his beer. A station break came and I could hear tires hissing by outside in the light rain. My jacket smelled damp. I never wear a raincoat on a job like this. They get in your way. The street lights threw stretched shapes against the bar windows. Phillips watched the passing shadows, waiting calm as anything for one of them to turn and come in the door.

I said, "You think Eisenhower, with that Kraut name, woulda picked our guy for the second spot?"

"Mighta."

"Hell no. Even if he had, Eisenhower didn't drop dead a year later."

"You're right there," Phillips said to humor me. He's not a man for theory.

"I tell you, Taft winnin' and then dyin', it was a godsend. Gave us the

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man we shoulda had. Never coulda elected him. The Commies, they'd never have let him get in power."

Phillips stiffened. I thought it was what I'd said, but then a guy came through the doors in a slick black raincoat. He was pale and I saw it was our man. Cheering at the convention came up then and he didn't notice anything funny, not until he got a few steps in and saw the faces.

Garrett's eyes widened as I came at him. He pulled his hands up like he was reaching for something under his coat, or maybe just to protect himself.

I didn't care which. I hit him once in the stomach to take the wind out of him and then gave him two quick overhand punches in the jaw. He went down nice and solid and wasn't going to get back up in a hurry.

Phillips searched him. There was no gun after all. The bar was dead quiet.

A guy in a porkpie hat came up to me all hot and bothered, like he hadn't been paying attention before, and said, "You can't just attack a, a member of the Congress! That's Congressman Garrett there! I don't care—"

The big talk went right out of him when I slammed a fist into his gut. Porkpie was another lawyer, no real fight in him.

I walked back to the bar and drained my beer. The '56 convention was rolling on, nominations just starting, but you knew that was all bull. Only one man was possible, and when the election came there'd be plenty guys like me to fix it so he won.

Just then they put on some footage of the President and I stood there a second, just watching him. There was a knot in my throat when I looked at him, a real American. There were damn few of us, even now. We'd gotten in by accident, maybe, but now we were going to make every day count. Clean up the country. And hell, if the work wasn't done by the time his second term ended in 1961, we might have to diddle the Constitution a little, keep him in power until things worked okay.

Cronkite came on then, babbling about letting Adlai Stevenson out of house arrest, and I went to help Phillips get Garrett to his feet. I sure didn't want to have to haul the guy out to our car.

We got him up with his raincoat all twisted around him. Then the porkpie hat guy was there again, but this time with about a dozen of them behind him. They looked mad and jittery. A bunch like that can be trouble. I wondered if this was such a good idea, taking Garrett in his neighborhood bar. But the chief said we had to show these types we'd go anywhere, anytime.

Porkpie said, "You got no warrant."

"Sure I do." I showed them the paper. These types always think paper is God.

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"Sit down," Phillips said, being civil. "You people all sit down."

"That's a congressman you got there. We—"

"Traitor, is what you mean," I said.

Peroxide came up then, screeching. "You think you can just take anybody, you lousy sonsabitches—"

Porkpie took a poke at me then. I caught it and gave him a right cross, pretty as you please. He staggered back. Still, I saw we could really get in a fix here if they all came at us.

Peroxide called out, "Come on, we can—"

She stopped when I pulled out the gun. It's a big steel automatic, just about the right size for a guy like me. Some guys use silencers with them but me, I like the noise.

They all looked at it a while and their faces changed, closing up, each one of them alone with their thoughts, and then I knew they wouldn't do anything.

"Come on," I said. We carried the traitor out into the night. I was so pumped up he felt light.

Even a year before, we'd have had big trouble bringing in a commie network type like Garrett. He was a big deal on the House Internal Security Committee and had been giving us a lot of grief. Now nailing him was easy. And all because of one man at the top with real courage.

We don't bother with the formalities any more. Phillips opened the trunk of the Pontiac and I dumped Garrett in. Easier and faster than cramming him into the front and I wanted to get out of there.

Garrett was barely conscious and just blinked at me as I slammed down the trunk. They'd wake him up plenty later.

As I came around to get in the driver's side I looked through the window of the bar. Cronkite was interviewing the President now. Ol' Joe looked like he was in good shape, real statesmanlike, but tough, you could see that.

Cronkite was probably asking him why he'd chosen Nixon for the V.P. spot, like there was any other choice. Like I'd tried to tell Phillips, Nixon's delivering California on the delegate issue in '52 had paved the way for the Taft ticket. And old Bob Taft, rest his soul, knew what the country needed when the Vice Presidency nomination came up.

Just like now. Joe, he doesn't forget a debt. So Dick Nixon was a shoo-in. McCarthy and Nixon—good ticket, regional balance, solid anti-commie values. We could do worse. A lot worse.

I got in and gunned the motor a little, feeling good. The rain had stopped. The meat in the trunk was as good as dead, but we'd deliver it fresh anyway. We took off with a roar into the darkness. ●

July 4 1988

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THE PRICE OF ORANGES

by Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress returns to our pages with a powerful tale that gently combines an often bitter reality with a touch of humor and a breath of hope. The author's most recent novel, *An Alien Light*, has just been released by Avon Books in paperback. Ms. Kress is currently working on a novel that is mostly set in Rochester, New York.

art Janet Aulisio

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"I'm worried about my granddaughter," Harry Kramer said, passing half of his sandwich to Manny Feldman. Manny took it eagerly. The sandwich was huge, thick slices of beef and horseradish between fresh slabs of crusty bread. Pigeons watched the park bench hopefully.

"Jackie. The granddaughter who writes books," Manny said. Harry watched to see that Manny ate. You couldn't trust Manny to eat enough; he stayed too skinny. At least in Harry's opinion. Manny, Jackie—the world, Harry sometimes thought, had all grown too skinny when he somehow hadn't been looking. Skimpy. Stretch-feeling. Harry nodded to see horseradish spurt in a satisfying stream down Manny's scraggly beard.

"Jackie. Yes," Harry said.

"So what's wrong with her? She's sick?" Manny eyed Harry's strudel, cherry with real yeast bread. Harry passed it to him. "Harry, the whole thing? I couldn't."

"Take it, take it, I don't want it. You should eat. No, she's not sick. She's miserable." When Manny, his mouth full of strudel, didn't answer, Harry put a hand on Manny's arm. *"Miserable."*

Manny swallowed hastily. "How do you know? You saw her this week?"

"No. Next Tuesday. She's bringing me a book by a friend of hers. I know from this." He drew a magazine from an inner pocket of his coat. The coat was thick tweed, almost new, with wooden buttons. On the cover of the glossy magazine a woman smiled contemptuously. A woman with hollow, starved-looking cheeks who obviously didn't get enough to eat either.

"That's not a book," Manny pointed out.

"So she writes stories, too. Listen to this. Just listen. 'I stood in my backyard, surrounded by the false bright toxin-fed green, and realized that the earth was dead. What else could it be, since we humans swarmed upon it like maggots on carrion, growing our hectic gleaming molds, leaving our slime trails across the senseless surface?' Does that sound like a happy woman?"

"Hoo boy," Manny said.

"It's all like that. 'Don't read my things, Popsy,' she says. 'You're not in the audience for my things.' Then she smiles without ever once showing her teeth." Harry flung both arms wide. "Who else should be in the audience but her own grandfather?"

Manny swallowed the last of the strudel. Pigeons fluttered angrily. "She never shows her teeth when she smiles? Never?"

"Never."

"Hoo boy," Manny said. "Did you want all of that orange?"

"No, I brought it for you, to take home. But did you finish that whole half a sandwich already?"

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"I thought I'd take it home," Manny said humbly. He showed Harry the tip of the sandwich, wrapped in the thick brown butcher paper, protruding from the pocket of his old coat.

Harry nodded approvingly. "Good, good. Take the orange, too. I brought it for you."

Manny took the orange. Three teenagers carrying huge shrieking radios sauntered past. Manny started to put his hands over his ears, received a look of dangerous contempt from the teenager with green hair, and put his hands on his lap. The kid tossed an empty beer bottle onto the pavement before their feet. It shattered. Harry scowled fiercely but Manny stared straight ahead. When the cacophony had passed, Manny said, "Thank you for the orange. Fruit, it costs so much this time of year."

Harry still scowled. "Not in 1937."

"Don't start that again, Harry."

Harry said sadly, "Why won't you ever believe me? Could I afford to bring all this food if I got it at 1988 prices? Could I afford this coat? Have you seen buttons like this in 1988, on a new coat? Have you seen sandwiches wrapped in that kind of paper since we were young? Have you? Why won't you believe me?"

Manny slowly peeled his orange. The rind was pale, and the orange had seeds. "Harry. Don't start."

"But why won't you just come to my room and *see?*"

Manny sectioned the orange. "Your room. A cheap furnished room in a Social Security hotel. Why should I go? I know what will be there. What will be there is the same thing in my room. A bed, a chair, a table, a hot plate, some cans of food. Better I should meet you here in the park, get at least a little fresh air." He looked at Harry meekly, the orange clutched in one hand. "Don't misunderstand. It's not from a lack of friendship I say this. You're good to me, you're the best friend I have. You bring me things from a great deli, you talk to me, you share with me the family I don't have. It's enough, Harry. It's *more* than enough. I don't need to see where you live like I live."

Harry gave it up. There were moods, times, when it was just impossible to budge Manny. He dug in, and in he stayed. "Eat your orange."

"It's a good orange. So tell me more about Jackie."

"Jackie." Harry shook his head. Two kids on bikes tore along the path. One of them swerved towards Manny and snatched the orange from his hand. "Aw riggghhhtttt!"

Harry scowled after the child. It had been a girl. Manny just wiped the orange juice off his fingers onto the knee of his pants. "Is everything she writes so depressing?"

"Everything," Harry said. "Listen to this one." He drew out another magazine, smaller, bound in rough paper with a stylized linen drawing

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of a woman's private parts on the cover. On the cover! Harry held the magazine with one palm spread wide over the drawing, which made it difficult to keep the pages open while he read. " 'She looked at her mother in the only way possible: with contempt, contempt for all the betrayals and compromises that had been her mother's life, for the sad soft lines of defeat around her mother's mouth, for the bright artificial dress too young for her wasted years, for even the leather handbag, Gucci of course, filled with blood money for having sold her life to a man who had long since ceased to want it.' "

"Hoo boy," Manny said. "About a *mother* she wrote that?"

"About everybody. All the time."

"And where *is* Barbara?"

"Reno again. Another divorce." How many had that been? After two, did anybody count? Harry didn't count. He imagined Barbara's life as a large roulette wheel like the ones on TV, little silver men bouncing in and out of red and black pockets. Why didn't she get dizzy?

Manny said slowly, "I always thought there was a lot of love in her."

"A lot of that she's got," Harry said dryly.

"Not Barbara—Jackie. A lot of . . . I don't know. Sweetness. Under the way she is."

"The way she is," Harry said gloomily. "Prickly. A cactus. But you're right, Manny, I know what you mean. She just needs someone to soften her up. Love her back, maybe. Although *I* love her."

The two old men looked at each other. Manny said, "Harry. . . ."

"I know, I know. I'm only a grandfather, my love doesn't count, I'm just there. Like air. 'You're wonderful, Popsy,' she says, and still no teeth when she smiles. But you know, Manny—you are right!" Harry jumped up from the bench. "You are! What she needs is a young man to love her!"

Manny looked alarmed. "I didn't say—"

"I don't know why I didn't think of it before!"

"Harry—"

"And her stories, too! Full of ugly murders, ugly places, unhappy endings. What she needs is something to show her that writing could be about sweetness, too."

Manny was staring at him hard. Harry felt a rush of affection. That Manny should have the answer! Skinny wonderful Manny!

Manny said slowly, "Jackie said to me, 'I write about reality.' That's what she said, Harry."

"So there's no sweetness in reality? Put sweetness in her life, her writing will go sweet. She *needs* this, Manny. A really nice fellow!"

Two men in jogging suits ran past. One of their Reeboks came down

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on a shard of beer bottle. "Every fucking time!" he screamed, bending over to inspect his shoe. "Fucking park!"

"Well, what do you expect?" the other drawled, looking at Manny and Harry. "Although you'd think that if we could clean up Lake Erie. . . ."

"Fucking derelicts!" the other snarled. They jogged away.

"Of course," Harry said, "it might not be easy to find the sort of guy to convince Jackie."

"Harry, I think you should maybe think—"

"Not here," Harry said suddenly. "Not here. *There.* In 1937."

"Harry. . . ."

"Yeah," Harry said, nodding several times. Excitement filled him like light, like electricity. What an idea! "It was different then."

Manny said nothing. When he stood up, the sleeve of his coat exposed the number tattooed on his wrist. He said quietly, "It was no paradise in 1937 either, Harry."

Harry seized Manny's hand. "I'm going to do it, Manny. Find someone for her there. Bring him here."

Manny sighed. "Tomorrow at the chess club, Harry? At one o'clock? It's Tuesday."

"I'll tell you then how I'm coming with this."

"Fine, Harry. Fine. All my wishes go with you. You know that."

Harry stood up too, still holding Manny's hand. A middle-aged man staggered to the bench and slumped onto it. The smell of whiskey rose from him in waves. He eyed Manny and Harry with scorn. "Fucking fags."

"Good night, Harry."

"Manny—if you'd only come . . . money goes so much farther there. . . ."

"Tomorrow at one. At the chess club."

Harry watched his friend walk away. Manny's foot dragged a little; the knee must be bothering him again. Harry wished Manny would see a doctor. Maybe a doctor would know why Manny stayed so skinny.

Harry walked back to his hotel. In the lobby, old men slumped in upholstery thin from wear, burned from cigarettes, shiny in the seat from long sitting. Sitting and sitting, Harry thought—life measured by the seat of the pants. And now it was getting dark. No one would go out from here until the next daylight. Harry shook his head.

The elevator wasn't working again. He climbed the stairs to the third floor. Halfway there, he stopped, felt in his pocket, counted five quarters, six dimes, two nickels, and eight pennies. He returned to the lobby. "Could I have two dollar bills for this change, please? Maybe old bills?"

The clerk looked at him suspiciously. "Your rent paid up?"

"Certainly," Harry said. The woman grudgingly gave him the money.

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"Thank you. You look very lovely today, Mrs. Raduski." Mrs. Raduski snorted.

In his room, Harry looked for his hat. He finally found it under his bed—how had it gotten under his bed? He dusted it off and put it on. It had cost him $3.25. He opened the closet door, parted the clothes hanging from their metal pole—like Moses parting the sea, he always thought, a Moses come again—and stepped to the back of the closet, remembering with his body rather than his mind the sharp little twist to the right just past the far gray sleeve of his good wool suit.

He stepped out into the bare corner of a warehouse. Cobwebs brushed his hat; he had stepped a little too far right. Harry crossed the empty concrete space to where the lumber stacks started, and threaded his way through them. The lumber, too, was covered with cobwebs; not much building going on. On his way out the warehouse door, Harry passed the night watchman coming on duty.

"Quiet all day, Harry?"

"As a church, Rudy," Harry said. Rudy laughed. He laughed a lot. He was also indisposed to question very much. The first time he had seen Harry coming out of the warehouse in a bemused daze, he must have assumed that Harry had been hired to work there. Peering at Rudy's round, vacant face, Harry realized that he must hold this job because he was someone's uncle, someone's cousin, someone's something. Harry had felt a small glow of approval; families should take care of their own. He had told Rudy that he had lost his key and asked him for another.

Outside it was late afternoon. Harry began walking. Eventually there were people walking past him, beside him, across the street from him. Everybody wore hats. The women wore bits of velvet or wool with dotted veils across their noses and long, graceful dresses in small prints. The men wore fedoras with suits as baggy as Harry's. When he reached the park there were children, girls in long black tights and hard shoes, boys in buttoned shirts. Everyone looked like it was Sunday morning.

Pushcarts and shops lined the sidewalks. Harry bought a pair of socks, thick gray wool, for 89 cents. When the man took his dollar, Harry held his breath: each first time made a little pip in his stomach. But no one ever looked at the dates of old bills. He bought two oranges for five cents each, and then, thinking of Manny, bought a third. At a candystore he bought *G-8 And His Battle Aces* for fifteen cents. At The Collectors' Cozy in the other time they would gladly give him thirty dollars for it. Finally, he bought a cherry Coke for a nickel and headed towards the park.

"Oh, excuse me," said a young man who bumped into Harry on the sidewalk. "I'm so sorry!" Harry looked at him hard: but, no. Too young. Jackie was twenty-eight.

Some children ran past, making for the movie theater. Spencer Tracy

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in *Captains Courageous*. Harry sat down on a green-painted wooden bench under a pair of magnificent Dutch elms. On the bench lay a newsmagazine. Harry glanced at it to see when in September this was: the 28th. The cover pictured a young blond Nazi soldier standing at stiff salute. Harry thought again of Manny, frowned, and turned the magazine cover down.

For the next hour, people walked past. Harry studied them carefully. When it got too dark to see, he walked back to the warehouse, on the way buying an apple kuchen at a bakery with a curtain behind the counter looped back to reveal a man in his shirt sleeves eating a plate of stew at a table bathed in soft yellow lamplight. The kuchen cost thirty-two cents.

At the warehouse, Harry let himself in with his key, slipped past Rudy nodding over *Paris Nights,* and walked to his cobwebby corner. He emerged from his third-floor closet into his room. Beyond the window, sirens wailed and would not stop.

"So how's it going?" Manny asked. He dripped kuchen crumbs on the chessboard; Harry brushed them away. Manny had him down a knight.

"It's going to take time to find somebody that's right," Harry said. "I'd like to have someone by next Tuesday when I meet Jackie for dinner, but I don't know. It's not easy. There are requirements. He has to be young enough to be attractive, but old enough to understand Jackie. He has to be sweet-natured enough to do her some good, but strong enough not to panic at jumping over fifty-two years. Somebody educated. An educated man—he might be more curious than upset by my closet. Don't you think?"

"Better watch your queen," Manny said, moving his rook. "So how are you going to find him?"

"It takes time," Harry said. "I'm working on it."

Manny shook his head. "You have to get somebody here, you have to convince him he *is* here, you have to keep him from turning right around and running back in time through your shirts. . . . I don't know, Harry. I don't know. I've been thinking. This thing is not simple. What if you did something wrong? Took somebody important out of 1937?"

"I won't pick anybody important."

"What if you made a mistake and brought your own grandfather? And something happened to him here?"

"My grandfather was already dead in 1937."

"What if you brought me? I'm already here."

"You didn't live here in 1937."

"What if you brought *you?*"

"I didn't live here either."

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"What if you. . . ."

"Manny," Harry said, "I'm not bringing somebody important. I'm not bringing somebody we know. I'm not bringing somebody for permanent. I'm just bringing a nice guy for Jackie to meet, go dancing, see a different kind of nature. A different view of what's possible. An innocence. I'm sure there are fellows here that would do it, but I don't know any, and I don't know how to bring any to her. From there I know. Is this so complicated? Is this so unpredictable?"

"Yes," Manny said. He had on his stubborn look again. How could somebody so skimpy look so stubborn? Harry sighed and moved his lone knight.

"I brought you some whole socks."

"Thank you. That knight, it's not going to help you much."

"Lectures. That's what there was there that there isn't here. Everybody went to lectures. No TV, movies cost money, they went to free lectures."

"I remember," Manny said. "I was a young man myself. Harry, this thing is not simple."

"Yes, it is," Harry said stubbornly.

"1937 was not simple."

"It will work, Manny."

"Check," Manny said.

That evening, Harry went back. This time it was the afternoon of September 16. On newsstands the New York *Times* announced that President Roosevelt and John L. Lewis had talked pleasantly at the White House. Cigarettes cost thirteen cents a pack. Women wore cotton stockings and clunky, high-heeled shoes. Schrafft's best chocolates were sixty cents a pound. Small boys addressed Harry as "sir."

He attended six lectures in two days. A Madame Trefania lectured on theosophy to a hall full of badly-dressed women with thin, pursed lips. A union organizer roused an audience to a pitch that made Harry leave after the first thirty minutes. A skinny, nervous missionary showed slides of religious outposts in China. An archeologist back from a Mexican dig gave a dry, impatient talk about temples to an audience of three people. A New Deal Democrat spoke passionately about aiding the poor, but afterwards addressed all the women present as "Sister." Finally, just when Harry was starting to feel discouraged, he found it.

A museum offered a series of lectures on "Science of Today—and Tomorrow." Harry heard a slim young man with a reddish beard speak with idealistic passion about travel to the moon, the planets, the stars. It seemed to Harry that compared to stars, 1989 might seem reasonably close. The young man had warm hazel eyes and a sense of humor. When he spoke about life in a space ship, he mentioned in passing that women would be freed from much domestic drudgery they now endured.

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Throughout the lecture, he smoked, lighting cigarettes with a masculine squinting of eyes and cupping of hands. He said that imagination was the human quality that would most help people adjust to the future. His shoes were polished.

But most of all, Harry thought, he had a *glow*. A fine golden Boy Scout glow that made Harry think of old covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Which here cost five cents.

After the lecture, Harry stayed in his chair in the front row, outwaiting even the girl with bright red lipstick who lingered around the lecturer, this Robert Gernshon. From time to time, Gernshon glanced over at Harry with quizzical interest. Finally the girl, red lips pouting, sashayed out of the hall.

"Hello," Harry said. "I'm Harry Kramer. I enjoyed your talk. I have something to show you that you would be very interested in."

The hazel eyes turned wary. "Oh, no, no," Harry said. "Something *scientific*. Here, look at this." He handed Gernshon a filtered Vantage Light.

"How long it is," Gernshon said. "What's this made of?"

"The filter? It's made of . . . a new filter material. Tastes milder and cuts down on the nicotine. Much better for you. Look at this." He gave Gernshon a styrofoam cup from MacDonald's. "It's made of a new material, too. Very cheap. Disposable."

Gernshon fingered the cup. "Who are you?" he said quietly.

"A scientist. I'm interested in the science of tomorrow, too. Like you. I'd like to invite you to see my laboratory, which is in my home."

"In your home?"

"Yes. In a small way. Just dabbling, you know." Harry could feel himself getting rattled; the young hazel eyes stared at him so steadily. *Jackie,* he thought. Dead earths. Maggots and carrion. Contempt for mothers. What would Gernshon say? When would Gernshon say *anything?*

"Thank you," Gernshon finally said. "When would be convenient?"

"Now?" Harry said. He tried to remember what time of day it was now. All he could picture was lecture halls.

Gernshon came. It was nine-thirty in the evening of Friday, September 17. Harry walked Gernshon through the streets, trying to talk animatedly, trying to distract. He said that he himself was very interested in travel to the stars. He said it had always been his dream to stand on another planet and take in great gulps of completely unpolluted air. He said his great heroes were those biologists who made that twisty model of DNA. He said science had been his life. Gernshon walked more and more silently.

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"Of course," Harry said hastily, "like most scientists, I'm mostly familiar with my own field. You know how it is."

"What is your field, Dr. Kramer?" Gernshon asked quietly.

"Electricity," Harry said, and hit him on the back of the head with a solid brass candlestick from the pocket of his coat. The candlestick had cost him three dollars at a pawn shop.

They had walked past the stores and pushcarts to a point where the locked business offices and warehouses began. There were no passers-by, no muggers, no street dealers, no Guardian Angels, no punk gangs. Only him, hitting an unarmed man with a candlestick. He was no better than the punks. But what else could he do? What else could he *do?* Nothing but hit him softly, so softly that Gernshon was struggling again almost before Harry got his hands and feet tied, well before he got on the blindfold and gag. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he kept saying to Gernshon. Gernshon did not look as if the apology made any difference. Harry dragged him into the warehouse.

Rudy was asleep over *Spicy Stories*. Breathing very hard, Harry pulled the young man—not more than 150 pounds, it was good Harry had looked for slim—to the far corner, through the gate, and into his closet.

"Listen," he said urgently to Gernshon after removing the gag. "Listen. I can call the Medicare Emergency Hotline. If your head feels broken. Are you feeling faint? Do you think you maybe might go into shock?"

Gernshon lay on Harry's rug, glaring at him, saying nothing.

"Listen, I know this is maybe a little startling to you. But I'm not a pervert, not a cop, not anything but a grandfather with a problem. My granddaughter. I need your help to solve it, but I won't take much of your time. You're now somewhere besides where you gave your lecture. A pretty long ways away. But you don't have to stay here long, I promise. Just two weeks, tops, and I'll send you back. I promise, on my mother's grave. And I'll make it worth your while. I promise."

"Untie me."

"Yes. Of course. Right away. Only you have to not attack me, because I'm the only one who can get you back from here." He had a sudden inspiration. "I'm like a foreign consul. You've maybe traveled abroad?"

Gernshon looked around the dingy room. "Untie me."

"I will. In two minutes. Five, tops. I just want to explain a little first."

"Where am I?"

"1989."

Gernshon said nothing. Harry explained brokenly, talking as fast as he could, saying he could move from 1989 to September, 1937 when he wanted to, but he could take Gernshon back too, no problem. He said he made the trip often, it was perfectly safe. He pointed out how much farther a small Social Security check, no pension, could go at 1937 prices.

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He mentioned Manny's strudel. Only lightly did he touch on the problem of Jackie, figuring there would be a better time to share domestic difficulties, and his closet he didn't mention at all. It was hard to keep his eyes averted from the closet door. He did mention how bitter people could be in 1989, how lost, how weary from expecting so much that nothing was a delight, nothing a sweet surprise. He was just working up to a tirade on innocence when Gernshon said again, in a different tone, "Untie me."

"Of course," Harry said quickly, "I don't expect you to believe me. Why should you think you're in 1989? Go, see for yourself. Look at that light, it's still early morning. Just be careful out there, is all." He untied Gernshon and stood with his eyes squeezed shut, waiting.

When nothing hit him, Harry opened his eyes. Gernshon was at the door. "Wait!" Harry cried. "You'll need more money!" He dug into his pocket and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, carefully saved for this, and all the change he had.

Gernshon examined the coins carefully, then looked up at Harry. He said nothing. He opened the door and Harry, still trembling, sat down in his chair to wait.

Gernshon came back three hours later, pale and sweating. "My God!"

"I know just what you mean," Harry said. "A zoo out there. Have a drink."

Gernshon took the mixture Harry had ready in his toothbrush glass and gulped it down. He caught sight of the bottle, which Harry had left on the dresser: Seagram's V.O., with the cluttered, tiny-print label. He threw the glass across the room and covered his face with his hands.

"I'm sorry," Harry said apologetically. "But then it cost only $3.37 the fifth."

Gernshon didn't move.

"I'm really sorry," Harry said. He raised both hands, palms up, and dropped them helplessly. "Would you . . . would you maybe like an orange?"

Gernshon recovered faster than Harry had dared hope. Within an hour he was sitting in Harry's worn chair, asking questions about the space shuttle; within two hours taking notes; within three become again the intelligent and captivating young man of the lecture hall. Harry, answering as much as he could as patiently as he could, was impressed by the boy's resilience. It couldn't have been easy. What if he, Harry, suddenly had to skip fifty-two more years? What if he found himself in 2041? Harry shuddered.

"Do you know that a movie now costs six dollars?"

Gernshon blinked. "We were talking about the moon landing."

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"Not any more, we're not. I want to ask *you* some questions, Robert. Do you think the earth is dead, with people sliming all over it like on carrion? Is this a thought that crosses your mind?"

"I . . . no."

Harry nodded. "Good, good. Do you look at your mother with contempt?"

"Of course not. Harry—"

"No, it's my turn. Do you think a woman who marries a man, and maybe the marriage doesn't work out perfect, whose does, but they raise at least one healthy child—say a daughter—that that woman's life has been a defeat and a failure?"

"No. I—"

"What would you think if you saw a drawing of a woman's private parts on the cover of a magazine?"

Gernshon blushed. He looked as if the blush annoyed him, but also as if he couldn't help it.

"Better and better," Harry said. "Now, think carefully on this next one—take your time—no hurry. Does reality seem to you to have sweetness in it as well as ugliness? Take your time."

Gernshon peered at him. Harry realized they had talked right through lunch. "But not all the time in the world, Robert."

"Yes," Gernshon said. "I think reality has more sweetness than ugliness. And more strangeness than anything else. Very much more." He looked suddenly dazed. "I'm sorry, I just—all this has happened so—"

"Put your head between your knees," Harry suggested. "There—better now? Good. There's someone I want you to meet."

Manny sat in the park, on their late-afternoon bench. When he saw them coming, his face settled into long sorrowful ridges. "Harry. Where have you been for two days? I was worried, I went to your hotel—"

"Manny," Harry said, "this is Robert."

"So I see," Manny said. He didn't hold out his hand.

"Him," Harry said.

"Harry. Oh, Harry."

"How do you do, sir," Gernshon said. He held out his hand. "I'm afraid I didn't get your full name. I'm Robert Gernshon."

Manny looked at him—at the outstretched hand, the baggy suit with wide tie, the deferential smile, the golden Baden-Powell glow. Manny's lips mouthed a silent word: *sir?*

"I have a lot to tell you," Harry said.

"You can tell all of us, then," Manny said. "Here comes Jackie now."

Harry looked up. Across the park a woman in jeans strode purposefully towards them. "Manny! It's only Monday!"

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"I called her to come," Manny said. "You've been gone from your room two days, Harry, nobody at your hotel could say where—"

"But *Manny,*" Harry said, while Gernshon looked, frowning, from one to the other and Jackie spotted them and waved.

She had lost more weight, Harry saw. Only two weeks, yet her cheeks had hollowed out and new, tiny lines touched her eyes. Skinny lines. They filled him with sadness. Jackie wore a blue tee-shirt that said LIFE IS A BITCH — THEN YOU DIE. She carried a magazine and a small can of mace disguised as hair spray.

"Popsy! You're here! Manny said—"

"Manny was wrong," Harry said. "Jackie, sweetheart, you look—it's good to see you. Jackie, I'd like you to meet somebody, darling. This is Robert. My friend. My friend Robert. Jackie Snyder."

"Hi," Jackie said. She gave Harry a hug, and then Manny one. Harry saw Gernshon gazing at her very tight jeans.

"Robert's a . . . a scientist," Harry said.

It was the wrong thing to say; Harry knew the moment he said it that it was the wrong thing. Science—all science—was, for some reason not completely clear to him, a touchy subject with Jackie. She tossed her long hair back from her eyes. "Oh, yeah? Not *chemical,* I hope?"

"I'm not actually a scientist," Gernshon said winningly. "Just a dabbler. I popularize new scientific concepts, write about them to make them intelligible."

"Like what?" Jackie said.

Gernshon opened his mouth, closed it again. A boy suddenly flashed past on a skateboard, holding a boom box. Metallica blasted the air. Overhead, a jet droned. Gernshon smiled weakly. "It's hard to explain."

"I'm capable of understanding," Jackie said coldly. "Women *can* understand science, you know."

"Jackie, sweetheart," Harry said, "what have you got there? Is that your new book?"

"No," Jackie said, "this is the one I said I'd bring you, by my friend. It's brilliant. It's about a man whose business partner betrays him by selling out to organized crime and framing the man. In jail he meets a guy who has founded his own religion, the House of Divine Despair, and when they both get out they start a new business, Suicide Incorporated, that helps people kill themselves for a fee. The whole thing is just a brilliant denunciation of contemporary America."

Gernshon made a small sound.

"It's a comedy," Jackie added.

"It sounds . . . it sounds a little depressing," Gernshon said.

Jackie looked at him. Very distinctly, she said, "It's reality."

Harry saw Gernshon glance around the park. A man nodded on a

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bench, his hands slack on his knees. Newspapers and MacDonald's wrappers stirred fitfully in the dirt. A trash container had been knocked over. From beside a scrawny tree enclosed shoulder-height by black wrought iron, a child watched them with old eyes.

"I brought you something else, too, Popsy," Jackie said. Harry hoped that Gernshon noticed how much gentler her voice was when she spoke to her grandfather. "A scarf. See, it's llama wool. Very warm."

Gernshon said, "My mother has a scarf like that. No, I guess hers is some kind of fur."

Jackie's face changed. "What kind?"

"I—I'm not sure."

"Not an endangered species, I hope."

"No. Not that. I'm sure not . . . that."

Jackie stared at him a moment longer. The child who had been watching strolled towards them. Harry saw Gernshon look at the boy with relief. About eleven years old, he wore a perfectly tailored suit and Italian shoes. Manny shifted to put himself between the boy and Gernshon. "Jackie, darling, it's so good to see you. . . ."

The boy brushed by Gernshon on the other side. He never looked up, and his voice stayed boyish and low, almost a whisper. "Crack. . . ."

"Step on one and you break your mother's back," Gernshon said brightly. He smiled at Harry, a special conspiratorial smile to suggest that children, at least, didn't change in fifty years. The boy's head jerked up to look at Gernshon.

"You talking about my mama?"

Jackie groaned. "No," she said to the kid. "He doesn't mean anything. Beat it."

"I don't forget," the boy said. He backed away slowly.

Gernshon said, frowning, "I'm sorry. I'm not sure exactly what all that was, but I'm sorry."

"Are you for real?" Jackie said angrily. "What the fucking hell *was* all that? Don't you realize this park is the only place Manny and my grandfather can get some fresh air?"

"I didn't—"

"That punk runner meant it when he said he won't forget!"

"I don't like your tone," Gernshon said. "Or your language."

"My language!" The corners of Jackie's mouth tightened. Manny looked at Harry and put his hands over his face. The boy, twenty feet away, suddenly let out a noise like a strangled animal, so piercing all four of them spun around. Two burly teenagers were running towards him. The child's face crumpled; he looked suddenly much younger. He sprang away, stumbled, made the noise again, and hurled himself, all animal terror, towards the street behind the park bench.

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"No!" Gernshon shouted. Harry turned towards the shout but Gernshon already wasn't there. Harry saw the twelve-wheeler bearing down, heard Jackie's scream, saw Gernshon's wiry body barrel into the boy's. The truck shrieked past, its air brakes deafening.

Gernshon and the boy rose in the street on the other side.

Car horns blared. The boy bawled, "Leggo my suit! You tore my suit!" A red light flashed and a squad car pulled up. The two burly teenagers melted away, and then the boy somehow vanished as well.

"Never find him," the disgruntled cop told them over the clipboard on which he had written nothing. "Probably just as well." He went away.

"Are you hurt?" Manny said. It was the first time he had spoken. His face was ashen. Harry put a hand across his shoulders.

"No," Gernshon said. He gave Manny his sweet smile. "Just a little dirty."

"That took *guts*," Jackie said. She was staring at Gernshon with a frown between her eyebrows. "Why did you do it?"

"Pardon?"

"Why? I mean, given what that kid is, given—oh, all of it—" she gestured around the park, a helpless little wave of her strong young hands that tore at Harry's heart. "Why bother?"

Gernshon said gently, "What that kid is, is a kid."

Manny looked skeptical. Harry moved to stand in front of Manny's expression before anyone wanted to discuss it. "Listen, I've got a wonderful idea, you two seem to have so much to talk about, about . . . bothering, and . . . everything. Why don't you have dinner together, on me? My treat." He pulled another twenty-dollar bill from his pocket. Behind him he could feel Manny start.

"Oh, I couldn't," Gernshon said, at the same moment that Jackie said warningly, "Popsy. . . ."

Harry put his palms on both sides of her face. "Please. Do this for me, Jackie. Without the questions, without the female protests. Just this once. For me."

Jackie was silent a long moment before she grimaced, nodded, and turned with half-humorous appeal to Gernshon.

Gernshon cleared his throat. "Well, actually, it would probably be better if all four of us came. I'm embarrassed to say that prices are higher in this city than in . . . that is, I'm not able to . . . but if we went somewhere less expensive, the Automat maybe, I'm sure all four of us could eat together."

"No, no," Harry said. "We already ate." Manny looked at him.

Jackie began, offended, "I certainly don't want—just what do you think is going on here, buddy? This is just to please my grandfather. Are you afraid I might try to jump your bones?"

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Harry saw Gernshon's quick, involuntary glance at Jackie's tight jeans. He saw, too, that Gernshon fiercely regretted the glance the instant he had made it. He saw that Manny saw, and that Jackie saw, and that Gernshon saw that they saw. Manny made a small noise. Jackie's face began to turn so black that Harry was astounded when Gernshon cut her off with a dignity no one had expected.

"No, of course not," he said quietly. "But *I* would prefer all of us to have dinner together for quite another reason. My wife is very dear to me, Miss Snyder, and I wouldn't do anything that might make her feel uncomfortable. That's probably irrational, but that's the way it is."

Harry stood arrested, his mouth open. Manny started to shake with what Harry thought savagely had better not be laughter. And Jackie, after staring at Gernshon a long while, broke into the most spontaneous smile Harry had seen from her in months.

"Hey," she said softly. "That's nice. That's really, genuinely, fucking nice."

The weather turned abruptly colder. Snow threatened but didn't fall. Each afternoon Harry and Manny took a quick walk in the park and then went inside, to the chess club or a coffee shop or the bus station or the library, where there was a table deep in the stacks on which they could eat lunch without detection. Harry brought Manny a poor boy with mayo, sixty-three cents, and a pair of imported wool gloves, one dollar on pre-season sale.

"So where are they today?" Manny asked on Saturday, removing the gloves to peek at the inside of the poor boy. He sniffed appreciatively. "Horseradish. You remembered, Harry."

"The museum, I think," Harry said miserably.

"What museum?"

"How should I know? He says, 'The museum today, Harry,' and he's gone by eight o'clock in the morning, no more details than that."

Manny stopped chewing. "What museum opens at eight o'clock in the morning?"

Harry put down his sandwich, pastrami on rye, thirty-nine cents. He had lost weight the past week.

"Probably," Manny said hastily, "they just talk. You know, like young people do, just talk. . . ."

Harry eyed him balefully. "You mean like you and Leah did when you were young and left completely alone."

"You better talk to him soon, Harry. No, to her." He seemed to reconsider Jackie. "No, to *him*."

"Talk isn't going to do it," Harry said. He looked pale and determined. "Gernshon has to be sent back."

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"Be sent?"

"He's *married,* Manny! I wanted to help Jackie, show her life can hold some sweetness, not be all struggle. What kind of sweetness is she going to find if she falls in love with a married man? You know how that goes! Jackie—" Harry groaned. How had all this happened? He had intended only the best for Jackie. Why didn't that count more? "He has to go back, Manny."

"How?" Manny said practically. "You can't hit him again, Harry. You were just lucky last time that you didn't hurt him. You don't want that on your conscience. And if you show him your, uh . . . your—"

"My closet. Manny, if you'd only come see, for a dollar you could get—"

"—then he could just come back any time he wants. So how?"

A sudden noise startled them both. Someone was coming through the stacks. "Librarians!" Manny hissed. Both of them frantically swept the sandwiches, beer (fifteen cents), and strudel into shopping bags. Manny, panicking, threw in the wool gloves. Harry swept the table free of crumbs. When the intruder rounded the nearest bookshelf, Harry was bent over *Making Paper Flowers* and Manny over *Porcelain of the Yung Cheng Dynasty*. It was Robert Gernshon.

The young man dropped into a chair. His face was ashen. In one hand he clutched a sheaf of paper, the handwriting on the last one trailing off into shaky squiggles.

After a moment of silence, Manny said diplomatically, "So where are you coming from, Robert?"

"Where's Jackie?" Harry demanded.

"Jackie?" Gernshon said. His voice was thick; Harry realized with a sudden shock that he had been crying. "I haven't seen her for a few days."

"A few *days?*" Harry said.

"No. I've been . . . I've been. . . ."

Manny sat up straighter. He looked intently at Gernshon over *Porcelain of the Yung Cheng Dynasty* and then put the book down. He moved to the chair next to Gershon's and gently took the papers from his hand. Gernshon leaned over the table and buried his head in his arms.

"I'm so awfully sorry, I'm being such a baby. . . ." His shoulders trembled. Manny separated the papers and spread them out on the library table. Among the hand-copied notes were two slim books, one bound between black covers and the other a pamphlet. *A Memoir of Auschwitz. Countdown to Hiroshima.*

For a long moment nobody spoke. Then Harry said, to no one in particular, "I thought he was going to science museums."

Manny laid his arm, almost casually, across Gernshon's shoulders. "So now you'll know not to be at either place. More people should have only known." Harry didn't recognize the expression on his friend's face,

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nor the voice with which Manny said to Harry, "You're right. He has to go back."

"But Jackie. . . ."

"Can do without this 'sweetness,' " Manny said harshly. "So what's so terrible in her life anyway that she needs so much help? Is she dying? Is she poor? Is she ugly? Is anyone knocking on her door in the middle of the night? Let Jackie find her own sweetness. She'll survive."

Harry made a helpless gesture. Manny's stubborn face, carved wood under the harsh fluorescent light, did not change. "Even *him* . . . Manny, the things he knows now—"

"You should have thought of that earlier."

Gernshon looked up. "Don't, I—I'm sorry. It's just coming across it, I never thought human beings—"

"No," Manny said. "But they can. You been here, every day, at the library, reading it all?"

"Yes. That and museums. I saw you two come in earlier. I've been reading, I wanted to *know*—"

"So now you know," Manny said in that same surprisingly casual, tough voice. "You'll survive, too."

Harry said, "Does Jackie know what's going on? Why you've been doing all this . . . learning?"

"No."

"And you—what will you do with what you now know?"

Harry held his breath. What if Gernshon just refused to go back? Gernshon said slowly, "At first, I wanted to not return. At all. How can I watch it, World War II and the camps—I have *relatives* in Poland. And then later the bomb and Korea and the gulags and Vietnam and Cambodia and the terrorists and AIDS—"

"Didn't miss anything," Harry muttered.

"—and not be able to *do* anything, not be able to even hope, knowing that everything to come is already set into history—how could I watch all that without any hope that it isn't really as bad as it seems to be at the moment?"

"It all depends what you look at," Manny said, but Gernshon didn't seem to hear him.

"But neither can I stay, there's Susan and we're hoping for a baby . . . I need to think."

"No, you don't," Harry said. "You need to go *back*. This is all my mistake. I'm sorry. You need to go back, Gernshon."

"Lebanon," Gernshon said. "D.D.T. The Cultural Revolution. Nicaragua. Deforestation. Iran—"

"Penicillin," Manny said suddenly. His beard quivered. "Civil rights.

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Mahatma Gandhi. Polio vaccines. Washing machines." Harry stared at him, shocked. Could Manny once have worked in a hand laundry?

"Or," Manny said, more quietly, "Hitler. Auschwitz. Hoovervilles. The Dust Bowl. What you *look* at, Robert."

"I don't know," Gernshon said. "I need to think. There's so much . . . and then there's that girl."

Harry stiffened. "Jackie?"

"No, no. Someone she and I met a few days ago, at a coffee shop. She just walked in. I couldn't believe it. I looked at her and just went into shock—and maybe she did too, for all I know. The girl looked exactly like me. And she *felt* like—I don't know. It's hard to explain. She felt like *me*. I said hello but I didn't tell her my name; I didn't dare." His voice fell to a whisper. "I think she's my granddaughter."

"Hoo boy," Manny said.

Gernshon stood. He made a move to gather up his papers and booklets, stopped, left them there. Harry stood, too, so abruptly that Gernshon shot him a sudden, hard look across the library table. "Going to hit me again, Harry? Going to kill me?"

"Us?" Manny said. "Us, Robert?" His tone was gentle.

"In a way, you already have. I'm not who I was, certainly."

Manny shrugged. "So be somebody better."

"Damn it, I don't think you understand—"

"I don't think *you* do, Reuven, boychik. This is the way it *is*. That's all. Whatever you had back there, you have still. Tell me, in all that reading, did you find anything about yourself, anything personal? Are you in the history books, in the library papers?"

"The Office of Public Documents takes two weeks to do a search for birth and death certificates," Gernshon said, a little sulkily.

"So you lost nothing, because you really *know* nothing," Manny said. "Only history. History is cheap. Everybody gets some. You can have all the history you want. It's what you make of it that costs."

Gernshon didn't nod agreement. He looked a long time at Manny, and something moved behind the unhappy hazel eyes, something that made Harry finally let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. It suddenly seemed that Gernshon was the one that was old. And he *was*—with the fifty-two years he'd gained since last week, he was older than Harry had been in the 1937 of *Captains Courageous* and wide-brimmed fedoras and clean city parks. But that was the good time, the one that Gernshon was going back to, the one Harry himself would choose, if it weren't for Jackie and Manny . . . still, he couldn't watch as Gernshon walked out of the book stacks, parting the musty air as heavily as if it were water.

Gernshon paused. Over his shoulder he said, "I'll go back. Tonight. I will."

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After he had left, Harry said, "This is my fault."
"Yes," Manny agreed.
"Will you come to my room when he goes? To . . . to help?"
"Yes, Harry."
Somehow, that only made it worse.

Gernshon agreed to a blindfold. Harry led him through the closet, the warehouse, the street. Neither of them seemed very good at this; they stumbled into each other, hesitated, tripped over nothing. In the warehouse Gernshon nearly walked into a pile of lumber, and in the sharp jerk Harry gave Gernshon's arm to deflect him, something twisted and gave way in Harry's back. He waited, bent over, behind a corner of a building while Gernshon removed his blindfold, blinked in the morning light, and walked slowly away.

Despite his back, Harry found that he couldn't return right away. Why not? He just couldn't. He waited until Gernshon had a large head start and then hobbled towards the park. A carousel turned, playing bright organ music: September 24. Two children he had never noticed before stood just beyond the carousel, watching it with hungry, hopeless eyes. Flowers grew in immaculate flower beds. A black man walked by, his eyes fixed on the sidewalk, his head bent. Two small girls jumping rope were watched by a smiling woman in a blue-and-white uniform. On the sidewalk, just beyond the carousel, someone had chalked a swastika. The black man shuffled over it. A Lincoln Zephyr V-12 drove by, $1090. There was no way it would fit through a closet.

When Harry returned, Manny was curled up on the white chenille bedspread that Harry had bought for $3.28, fast asleep.

"What did I accomplish, Manny? What?" Harry said bitterly. The day had dawned glorious and warm, unexpected Indian summer. Trees in the park showed bare branches against a bright blue sky. Manny wore an old red sweater, Harry a flannel workshirt. Harry shifted gingerly, grimacing, on his bench. Sunday strollers dropped ice cream wrappers, cigarettes, newspapers, Diet Pepsi cans, used tissues, popcorn. Pigeons quarreled and children shrieked.

"Jackie's going to be just as hard as ever—and why not?" Harry continued. "She finally meets a nice fellow, he never calls her again. Me, I leave a young man miserable on a sidewalk. Before I leave him, I ruin his life. While I leave him, I ruin my back. *After* I leave him, I sit here guilty. There's no answer, Manny."

Manny didn't answer. He squinted down the curving path.

"I don't know, Manny. I just don't know."

Manny said suddenly, "Here comes Jackie."

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Harry looked up. He squinted, blinked, tried to jump up. His back made sharp protest. He stayed where he was, and his eyes grew wide.

"Popsy!" Jackie cried. "I've been looking for you!"

She looked radiant. All the lines were gone from around her eyes, all the sharpness from her face. Her very collar bones, Harry thought dazedly, looked softer. Happiness haloed her like light. She held the hand of a slim, red-haired woman with strong features and direct hazel eyes.

"This is Ann," Jackie said. "I've been looking for you, Popsy, because . . . well, because I need to tell you something." She slid onto the bench next to Harry, on the other side from Manny, and put one arm around Harry's shoulders. The other hand kept a close grip on Ann, who smiled encouragement. Manny stared at Ann as at a ghost.

"You see, Popsy, for a while now I've been struggling with something, something really important. I know I've been snappy and difficult, but it hasn't been—everybody needs somebody to love, you've often told me that, and I know how happy you and Grammy were all those years. And I thought there would never be anything like that for me, and certain people were making everything all so hard. But now . . . well, now there's Ann. And I wanted you to know that."

Jackie's arm tightened. Her eyes pleaded. Ann watched Harry closely. He felt as if he were drowning.

"I know this must come as a shock to you," Jackie went on, "but I also know you've always wanted me to be happy. So I hope you'll come to love her the way I do."

Harry stared at the red-haired woman. He knew what was being asked of him, but he didn't believe in it, it wasn't real, in the same way weather going on in other countries wasn't really real. Hurricanes. Drought. Sunshine. When what you were looking at was a cold drizzle.

"I think that of all the people I've ever known, Ann is the most together. The most compassionate. And the most moral."

"Ummm," Harry said.

"Popsy?"

Jackie was looking right at him. The longer he was silent, the more her smile faded. It occurred to him that the smile had showed her teeth. They were very white, very even. Also very sharp.

"I . . . I . . . hello, Ann."

"Hello," Ann said.

"See, I told you he'd be great!" Jackie said to Ann. She let go of Harry and jumped up from the bench, all energy and lightness. "You're wonderful, Popsy! You, too, Manny! Oh, Ann, this is Popsy's best friend, Manny Feldman. Manny, Ann Davies."

"Happy to meet you," Ann said. She had a low, rough voice and a sweet smile. Harry felt hurricanes, drought, sunshine.

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Jackie said, "I know this is probably a little unexpected—"

Unexpected. "Well—" Harry said, and could say no more.

"It's just that it was time for me to come out of the closet."

Harry made a small noise. Manny managed to say, "So you live here, Ann?"

"Oh, yes. All my life. And my family, too, since forever."

"Has Jackie . . . has Jackie met any of them yet?"

"Not yet," Jackie said. "It might be a little . . . tricky, in the case of her parents." She smiled at Ann. "But we'll manage."

"I wish," Ann said to her, "that you could have met *my* grandfather. He would have been just as great as your Popsy here. He always was."

"Was?" Harry said faintly.

"He died a year ago. But he was just a wonderful man. Compassionate *and* intelligent."

"What . . . what did he do?"

"He taught history at the university. He was also active in lots of organizations—Amnesty International, the ACLU, things like that. During World War II he worked for the Jewish rescue leagues, getting people out of Germany."

Manny nodded. Harry watched Jackie's teeth.

"We'd like you both to come to dinner soon," Ann said. She smiled. "I'm a good cook."

Manny's eyes gleamed.

Jackie said, "I know this must be hard for you—" but Harry saw that she didn't really mean it. She didn't think it was hard. For her it was so real that it was natural weather, unexpected maybe, but not strange, not out of place, not out of time. In front of the bench, sunlight striped the pavement like bars.

Suddenly Jackie said, "Oh, Popsy, did I tell you that it was your friend Robert who introduced us? Did I tell you that already?"

"Yes, sweetheart," Harry said. "You did."

"He's kind of a nerd, but actually all right."

After Jackie and Ann left, the two old men sat silent a long time. Finally Manny said diplomatically, "You want to get a snack, Harry?"

"She's happy, Manny."

"Yes. You want to get a snack, Harry?"

"She didn't even recognize him."

"No. You want to get a snack?"

"Here, have this. I got it for you this morning." Harry held out an orange, a deep-colored navel with flawless rind: seedless, huge, guaranteed juicy, nurtured for flavor, perfect.

"Enjoy," Harry said. "It cost me ninety-two cents." ●

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INDIAN GIVING

y Sage Walker

The author earned an M.D. at the University of Oklahoma and interned at Cambridge Hospital in Boston. A recent graduate of Cazenovia College, she currently resides in Taos, New Mexico. We believe Indian Giving is her first sale.

Art: Laura Lakey

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Greg's Cessna cleared the meadow fence by just a hair. Meg watched the plane lift above the valley before she exhaled. She didn't really believe she could hold a plane in the air with her breath, but she always tried. The habit wasn't worth breaking. Her energy should go toward breaking her real habit, her nicotine addiction.

The tiny plane cleared the crest of the San Juans and headed east across the wilderness toward Los Alamos. North was Apache country south was Albuquerque, and Greg's mountain ranch was the middle of nowhere.

Meg was really alone, now. She had no excuses, no damned job to deal with for a week. The lab could live without her for that long. She was here to quit smoking, absolutely by God quit this time, so there.

Coyote drowsed, hidden in the thicket by the spring. He heard the plane, but that buzzing noise was not part of his world. He heard it, but it did not disturb his dreams.

Meg crossed the tiny porch of the old hut and checked the doorway for fresh spiderwebs. Safe enough, the webs were dusty and dry, but black widows loved these old adobes.

The interior was deeply shadowed. She stood with her heavy bag on her shoulder, waiting for her eyes to adapt. That's a habit, too, she realized. A habit that crept up slowly, a toll of years. And tobacco. When the toxin was gone from her system, her night vision would improve. Oh, not back to the instant adjustment of a girl of eighteen, but back to good enough for a woman of thirty-five.

Meg could see the kitchen counter now, and the tin bucket near the sink. She ducked under the low lintel into the bedroom and tossed her bag on the bed. Dust puffed up and she sneezed.

Well, she had told Greg she could keep busy here.

"I'll clean the old place up," she had said, "and pick some apples. You said you pruned the orchard this spring."

"Okay," he said. "Don't bother cleaning too much. Linda and I are planning to take down everything but the walls when we build up there in a year or so."

Meg unpacked supplies; food, coffee (she hated coffee without cigarettes), packages of gum, a dozen or so books, a fifth of vodka, and a shiny cellophane pack of twenty Class A filter cigarettes.

Meg knew better than to have no cigarettes around. The last time she had tried quitting without an emergency pack, she had panicked in thirty minutes and started swimming to shore in La Paz in thirty-one. She wasn't a great swimmer, but she made it.

There had to be at least one cigarette, so she wouldn't give up too soon.

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This time, to buy more would mean a five mile walk to the ranger station and a phone call to beg for a pickup. Then she would hear about it for years, and Greg had promised not to come after her, anyway.

No tranks, no nicotine gum, no hypnosis tapes, not this time. Just the vodka, and she didn't like vodka. But you had to have something for emergencies.

Meg picked up the pack of cigarettes and laid it in the cabinet above the kitchen sink. Out of sight, but not out of reach.

She shook out the dusty blanket. A mother mouse ran one way. Meg ran the other, and threw the blanket across the courtyard. She stayed outside long enough to give the creature time to move her babies, then picked up the blanket by two corners and hung it over a wall. She could wash it. Sure she could, in a bucket, with water carried up from the spring and heated on the wood stove. That meant chopping some wood. The limbs from spring pruning were dry by now, and piled in a heap in the courtyard.

Physical activity reduces the craving for tobacco, current wisdom said. Meg found the ax.

The sun was hot on her shoulders. A pile of firewood grew slowly, apple and cedar. Meg stopped when she ran out of breath, long before two days' supply was cut. And it would be cold, later, October cold, near frost.

Her cigarette hunger was less than she expected, but she knew that as soon as her oxygen debt was paid, she would want one. She was thirsty. The nearest water was at the spring.

Meg drank deep gulps from the bucket. She knelt to pull handfuls of liquid ice to her hot face and the back of her neck. She yelped. That little human noise rang in her ears in the afternoon silence. She shivered and settled her back against a sunwarmed boulder. A tiny breeze came up, summer hot. Leaves rustled above her. From here, she could follow a line of gold twisting its way into the mountains, cottonwoods following water traces. Noisy trees, those cottonwoods. They would rattle in any breeze. In the spring, they filled the streets at home with long skeins of gray-white pollen. The Indians called them ghost turds.

Meg looked down at the gray curl of smoke from the half-smoked cigarette in her hand. Damn it, she hadn't even noticed opening the pack.

Coyote grinned at the trace of medicine smoke in the air. He moved wary and golden-eyed, unseen, to see who called. This skinny white woman sitting by the spring was no one special. But she could be amusing, some of the others had been. Coyote never stayed around anyone for long unless they amused him. Maybe this one could appreciate a trick or two. Coyote yawned over sharp white teeth, and now his grin was wider.

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By morning, only four cigarettes were smoked. Meg tried half a cup of coffee, black, with no nicotine, then dug the pack out of the cupboard. She felt heavy when she finished the cigarette, a true sensation of the weight of the toxin. She was just slightly dizzy. She would cough in a day or two, deep full coughs as the cilia in her abraded airways began to recover.

Meg carried her second cup of coffee to the spring. The hot mug felt good in her hands. She knelt by the water, hunching her shoulders in her jacket and looking for nothing at all. These little granite stones in the water were sharp edged, new as the world knows time. Watch them long enough, they'll go smooth, watch them long enough, they will be gray sand in an ocean . . .

She shook her head, irritated by the hypnosis of the water, the sense of lazy timelessness she felt. Polynesian paralysis, hillbilly inertia, *mañana,* whatever you called it, it always crept up when you dropped your guard. Too long outdoors, and she feared she might be as immobile as a blanket Indian. The ones she knew were never on time. They always seemed to be occupied with some intricate and inexplicable ceremony of living that never resulted in consistent output.

Meg had lived in Indian country all her life. She didn't understand Indians at all. They seemed to speak English but it came from a different place, as if a tree or a rock was talking and trying to tell you its thoughts. Oh, you saw genius sometimes, genius and manure in the soft curves of those black glazed pots, smooth and heavy to hold, comforting . . .

Something skittered in the sand beside her. She jerked her head to look. Something small, maybe. She couldn't see anything moving.

There she was again, dreaming in the daytime. Meg lit another cigarette and watched the smoke rise in sinuous curves. She was going to miss these moments, miss these little friend sticks. They marked the nervous minutes of the days and announced that one task was done and the next was waiting, and now this cigarette was gone.

Damn it, she wasn't trying! She didn't need a cigarette right now, she wasn't even suffering yet! Just another example of self-sabotage. The problem was a lack of self-discipline; she was an irrational fool. Meg carefully ground out the butt.

A sliver of polished stone lay on the ground next to her hand. It was precisely the size and shape of a thumbnail, complete with faint ridges and a shadow of a half-moon. Meg picked it up, stared for a moment, then tossed it down, revolted. A drug-store fingernail is an oval. This was a whole nail, complete with a ragged base. But it looked like stone. She picked it up again, and held it to the light. She could see shimmers of pearly color. It was truly an opal, a piece of Mexican opal, not a piece

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of plastic or a nail ripped from a bed of flesh. It was clean and it was smooth to her fingers, so she didn't toss it away. Meg put it in her pocket, something comforting to stroke. It could help her hands not reach for another cigarette.

Coyote watched from the ridge. The woman took the stone, she accepted his first gift. He wouldn't howl, not in the bright morning, but he danced a little Coyote dance, and the cottonwood leaves danced with him.

The woman looked up at him, but she couldn't see him. She only saw wind in the trees. Take a gift from Coyote, make him laugh, and he will bring you another. But don't take too much, woman. Don't take too much.

Coyote watched that woman do human things, go back and forth to the little house, rake apples into piles, jump at a wasp who wasn't bothering her at all, pull apples from the trees. When she called him again with that smoke, she was in the orchard. Person places are not good places, you don't call Coyote from there; you must pay attention when you call Coyote. The house was a person place, but a human shape could go in, maybe. Coyote would wait for the moon to rise. Coyote would take a nap.

Meg kept her hands and her back and her legs working for as long as they would stand it. She stretched on the low bed, and realized there had been ten or maybe twelve whole minutes in the day when she hadn't thought about a cigarette.

The kiva fireplace in the corner must have been built by an Indian, because it didn't smoke and it burned hot. How old was this place? Hundreds of years, minimum, but someone had kept it mudded, or it would have melted away years ago. Adobe houses can be as old as the Earth. Some Spanish family built it, sure. Spanish like most of the people here; if you asked them they would tell you. "My grandmother was Apache, my grandfather was Basque."

So this was an Indian house. Tobacco was an Indian gift. We gave them alcohol; fair trade. We've tried to kill each other off since Plymouth Rock. Meg watched the flames dance and feed each other. The cedar smoke was almost as rich as tobacco.

It could have been dawn when she woke, the room was that bright. She added more cedar to the fireplace and crouched to blow on the coals. It was bitter cold tonight, there would be frost by morning, but the apples would still be okay. Meg grabbed her jacket and padded to the kitchen for a cigarette. She walked out to the porch to light it, and sat with her back against the adobe wall. She could almost see color in this moonlight, and the moon was not full yet. Cloud shadows moved across the crest of

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the mountains. The valley and the orchard were motionless. She could hear her own breath.

A coyote wailed. Meg froze and held her breath. This one was close enough for her to see, had to be, but she couldn't see anything moving anywhere. The howl stopped.

Now. Quick, if she ran now, she might make it inside the house. This wasn't a distant predator, this was a hungry beast and far too close. She clapped both hands over her vulnerable throat and sprang for the door. Meg tripped over the doorstep and scrambled to the fire and safety. Laughter followed her, wild, crazy laughter, a sound like no animal she had ever heard.

Be calm, settle down, it's just a coyote talking, they don't eat people, you've heard them before. He's hunting a rabbit, not a grown woman, settle down, go to sleep. The litany didn't help. She hung her jacket over the window, unreasonably afraid of what she might see looking in. She felt like a fool while she did it, an unreasonable, illogical fool.

Morning's first cigarette was just the first third of one. The pack was getting low, but more than several were still in there. Meg was pleased by how strong it tasted, and how much she coughed after just that little dose of poison. A mound of red dust was piled just by the doorway. Next to the dust was a rough piece of something like red coral. The objects were carefully placed so she would see them. Meg crouched to look at them, afraid to walk past. Nothing was there yesterday. Nothing was there last night, she was sure of that.

So, someone had left her some weird stuff, someone was on this mountain, she wasn't alone, and she wasn't going to panic. Not like some fool who thinks anyone who leaves things by your door is practicing voodoo or something. Absolutely not. Maybe these things weren't really here, maybe she hadn't noticed them, maybe she wouldn't touch them and they would disappear.

Maybe she would touch them and find they weren't real and she really was crazy. But if she picked them up and they were real, then she had a visitor and she didn't want a visitor, she didn't want anybody up here, unless it was someone she knew.

She grabbed the coral. It was rough and solid and real. It might have been the kind used in Zuni jewelry, if it were polished up. The dust was fine and greasy, like makeup.

Meg went to the kitchen and found a butcher knife to carry with her to the spring. She couldn't find footprints, or broken leaves, or anything disturbed at all.

By evening, she stopped jumping at every noise. She was too busy counting cigarettes. There were seven left. The door on the cabin had a

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good bolt. She put a chair in front of the bedroom window and balanced a glass of water on the sill. She built the fire high, and settled on the hearth to watch it. If she stayed up later tonight, if she waited till the moon rose, then she would be used to the light and the coyote noise. Odd that only one was singing last night, wasn't it? Coyotes always sang together, didn't they? The thick walls of the house promised safety. This place, this work in the orchard and the house, this lazy firewatching in the early dusk were reassuring and she felt less fearful. Everything moved slowly here, everything was calm.

Those things she found on the porch this morning were some sort of gift, not threats. It might be nice to get a gift of coral, a polished gift, a heavy necklace of coral and turquoise set in silver. One that was made like no other, made just for you and offered in silence . . .

Coyote danced and howled at the night. His voice brought echoes, bouncing through the canyons, dancing across the high meadows. It is a good laugh, a little laugh, these echoes in the moonlight. A little laugh while Coyote waits for a different time as Coyote knows time. If that woman will play, there will be a better laugh. If she will take all the gifts, then Coyote can have a man-shape for a while.

Meg woke in bright daylight. Only babies should be able to sleep all night on a stone floor, with only a blanket to cushion it. Non-smokers slept better, so they said, but this was ridiculous. She stretched to find aches and pains. No aches, no pains. She stared out the window while she drank cold water from the undisturbed glass.

Morning coffee tasted wonderful, even without a cigarette. Maybe she would wait for her first smoke until noon, today, whatever today was. Oh, well, the plane would come back sooner or later, so why worry? She would smoke down by the spring, as soon as today's apples were picked.

But plenty of apples were already picked. Nobody would be coming up here for applesauce, and Meg was tired of eating it. The aspen might not look quite this golden tomorrow, the mountains would almost certainly be a different blue. Meg wandered to the spring with her cigarette and watched the smoke curl up to the sky . . .

The gifts were piled on her backrest boulder, this time. A shiny abalone shell, jet, more Mexican opals, pure white stones, and something that looked like a kind of iron ore. She touched the objects one by one, dazed and wondering. If you took one piece of abalone and fitted this little bit of jet just there, in the middle, it looked like an eye, a very human eye. She played with the stones, moving them randomly. Here's a profile, there's a pebble shaped like a tooth. Wow, she was a child again, playing in a sandpile.

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Cottonwood leaves rustled, chattering in a sudden chill breeze. Meg focused on the stones clutched in her fist. Somebody or something on this mountain was leaving things for her to find and it made no sense at all. She felt eyes in the trees around her and she was all alone up here. A branch snapped behind her. She ran for the house.

She grabbed her butcher knife and stalked the clearing, looking for signs of danger. But there was nothing at the spring, nothing moving anywhere. The day was still and quiet.

Those little bits of rock, they had to come from somewhere, but they were just bits of rock and shell and no real threat to a thinking person. Meg felt silly carrying a butcher knife around, anyhow. She stuck it in the back pocket of her jeans, but that was risky, so she carried it back to the house.

By now, the cottonwoods were only trees rustling in the breeze. She didn't hear them laughing, not quite as loud, not from here in the cabin, in the structured safety of pots and pans and things to do, if she would just get busy and do them.

Birds left tufts of cattail pollen by the spring. Coyote yawned and watched the birds spin bits of a dark cloud into hair and tuck it in low branches of a willow tree. A breeze practiced at drawing the whorl of a fingerprint in the sand, then blew it away. Coyote gathered those things. That woman found a bone of white rock in the meadow, and touched it gently. Good. Bones, teeth, hair, skin of red coral, veins of turquoise, all those things were ready. Everything to make a man, if she would ask for one. Maybe then she would laugh.

She didn't look quite so jumpy today. A wasp buzzed by her head, once, and she just watched it, like a normal person would do. Coyote heard her singing, little bits of songs, while she worked in the sun and dreamed in the shade. That woman was learning to see. Coyote took care to stay hidden. The moon would be full, this night.

Meg picked up the blanket in the courtyard and put it back down again. She didn't want to wash it yet. So she raked up windfall apples and she scrubbed the kitchen floor and if she could have found corn, she would have tried to grind it with two stones, but still, by afternoon, there were only two cigarettes in the pack.

Meg looked at one, balanced it in her hand. Cigarettes are so lightweight, so pleasant to hold. They smell nice if you sniff them. Stale smoke smells awful. If a whiff of tobacco smoke were anywhere within a hundred yards, Meg knew she would be able to track it now. The sense of smell comes back quickly, the pep talks always said. Meg sniffed her armpit. Damned if it wasn't true.

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She spent ten minutes by the spring, washing away sweat and wincing at the cold water.

Coyote's nose smelled that sweat. Coyote's nose told him a story about that woman. It was an old story and a simple story, but it compels, and he found that napping was a hard thing to do that afternoon. Coyote paced through twilight, waiting for the moon to rise.

Two cigarettes left in all the known world, and a fifth of vodka for emergencies. Meg picked up the bottle on the mantel and moved it about two inches to the right. Alcohol is the worst, the absolute worst thing to have, if you want a cigarette. She put the very last cigarette next to the bottle. This cigarette, this very last one except for the very last one, wouldn't it be nice to have it watching the fire, hearing someone breathe softly next to you? Wouldn't it be nice to have, just once, a wonderful, uninvolved, all out orgy with a perfect stranger?

She would trade her very last cigarette for a good lay tonight.

Really? Yes, this time, really.

"Give me a real gift," she said.

She was paying attention, oh, yes, she was, to the fire and the cedar and the night outside, and her wish was a true one in the thick blue smoke of tobacco that was such strong medicine to her now.

Meg heard soft steps beside her. She kept her eyes closed. There couldn't be anyone here, but she felt a sense of presence beside her, a warmth in the room. She heard, definitely, yes, definitely, the sound of breathing. Maybe if she tried just one quick glance, and saw nothing there . . .

She tried a quick glance. A man sat beside her, a man with beautiful hands and well muscled forearms. And no clothes on at all. She saw that much before she closed her eyes tight again.

She sat as still as she knew how to sit, and listened to her heart pound in her ears. She had to move sometime, she had to know, but she didn't dare open her eyes. A branch snapped in the fireplace and she blinked at the noise. She heard a chuckle near her ear.

He was a tall man and a strong man and he was at ease by her fire. Silky black hair streamed loose on his shoulders, and he had great shoulders. Good thighs, just enough muscle. Damn it, in this firelight she couldn't get a full view, but if she had designed an imaginary lover, she would bet that the rest of him was as well modeled. He turned his head and firelight flashed on his smile, and his smile was a challenge she intended to meet.

Meg stood up slowly and walked to the mantel. She picked up her very last cigarette. She lit it and offered it to him, watching her hand tremble.

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He laughed, and leapt to his feet. He took the cigarette from her fingers and tossed it away.

She moved and he moved. She wasn't sure who grabbed who. He was strong and he was agile, and he pulled her close to his chest. He smelled better than any man could, he smelled wild and musky and clean. She didn't want to let go of him at all, but she had to get out of her clothes. He held her while she wiggled. She tried to pull her shirt over her head, but that didn't work, so she grabbed her shirt collar with both hands and yanked. Buttons popped. She twisted her arms out of the damned thing.

Meg clutched at his shoulder with one hand and tried to get out of her jeans with the other. His mouth burned hot on her skin and she didn't want him to stop kissing her. He had one hand on the back of her head and one on her left breast and whoever this character was, he was no help with a zipper. She pulled at the waistband of her jeans with both hands and managed to get one leg free. He moved his hand from her breast and grabbed for her crotch. A hand is only a hand, but it was obviously there to keep things under control while she got rid of the remaining denim. She appreciated the consideration, but she was off balance now, trying to get her other leg free.

Meg backed up a step, so she could lean against the mantel and tug at her jeans. Her shoulder hit the vodka bottle and it crashed to the floor. She was squeezed between her lover and the wall and she pushed at him so she could catch just one breath. She twisted against the warmth of his hand. Her jeans fell to the floor and she kicked them loose. She saw them sail through the air and land in the splattered vodka.

He clutched her hips with both his hands. She tried to push closer to him, but she felt broken glass under her feet. She shoved him, hard, and they landed on the floor.

He growled as he entered her, and she held him with all the strength she had. This man wasn't afraid to delay action, he was moving fast. She gripped handfuls of his long hair for balance and gave a triumphant yell.

He locked his muscles and shuddered. Meg sank against his chest, hoping that things weren't really over. Maybe just on hold.

Her forgotten jeans flamed bright, close to the kindling.

Meg let him rest for a long, long, while, maybe for two whole breaths. She moved against him, a silent pleading for more, and things began to happen again, in a slower, measured rhythm, this time. Meg rolled beneath him. Self and time and tomorrow and forever became the same eternal now . . .

Red light, bright enough to see through her closed eyes?

"Aieee!" her lover howled. He scrambled away from her. He slapped at his bare ass, batting at a spark. Fire blazed in the firewood stack and licked at the walls.

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There was a remarkable amount of flame. Meg ran for the waterbucket. It was half full. She threw it toward the fireplace. Blankets could smother flames, she knew, but her blanket was in the yard. She snatched a pot of applesauce off the stove and ran for the bedroom to throw that in. Her hero was jumping up and down, yelping and laughing, no help at all.

She grabbed what was left of the coffee, and threw that too, the whole cup. Her lover laughed harder, and capered in the shadows, still clutching his burned behind.

"Do something," she yelled. He grinned. Did he understand English? He hadn't said a word yet.

"Please!" she yelled.

He stopped jumping up and down and winked at her. Then he turned away, planted his feet firmly, and pissed in the fire.

She laughed and he laughed and the flames roared. She laughed until she couldn't move. He had to shove her out the door. They cleared the house just as the roof caught. They whooped and shouted in the shadows and applauded bursts of sparks. Meg's sides ached and she laughed through tears and smoke. She danced in the leaping firelight, laughed until she could laugh no more, and laughed again. She was never sure when it was that she knew she was laughing alone.

Met kept busy for the rest of the week. The fire had burned a hole in the roof near the fireplace, but it stopped there. The walls were okay. All of her clothes were gone, but she didn't need clothes while she worked in the hot sun, and the mouse blanket kept her warm at night. There were canned goods left in the kitchen, and more apples than she could eat. She cleaned up the mess as best she could.

The man might work at the ranger station, she thought. Or maybe he was a hunter, scouting for game out of season. Meg sifted through the ashes, finding little bits of stone and turquoise and coral scattered near the hearth. Or maybe he . . .

She stacked what she found on the boulder by the spring.

The fireplace still worked. Stars gleamed through the hole in the roof at night. She listened for coyote song, but the mountains were silent. She wanted a cigarette sometimes, a lot of the time, most of the time, but not really.

Coyote watched that woman climb into the little plane, wearing her blanket. She still didn't laugh enough, that woman. But she had learned to laugh a little. When the plane man asked her about the fire, she told him it was a monument to her last cigarette. She laughed then, all right.

Coyote heard the plane, but that buzzing noise was not part of his world. He heard it, but it did not disturb his dreams. ●

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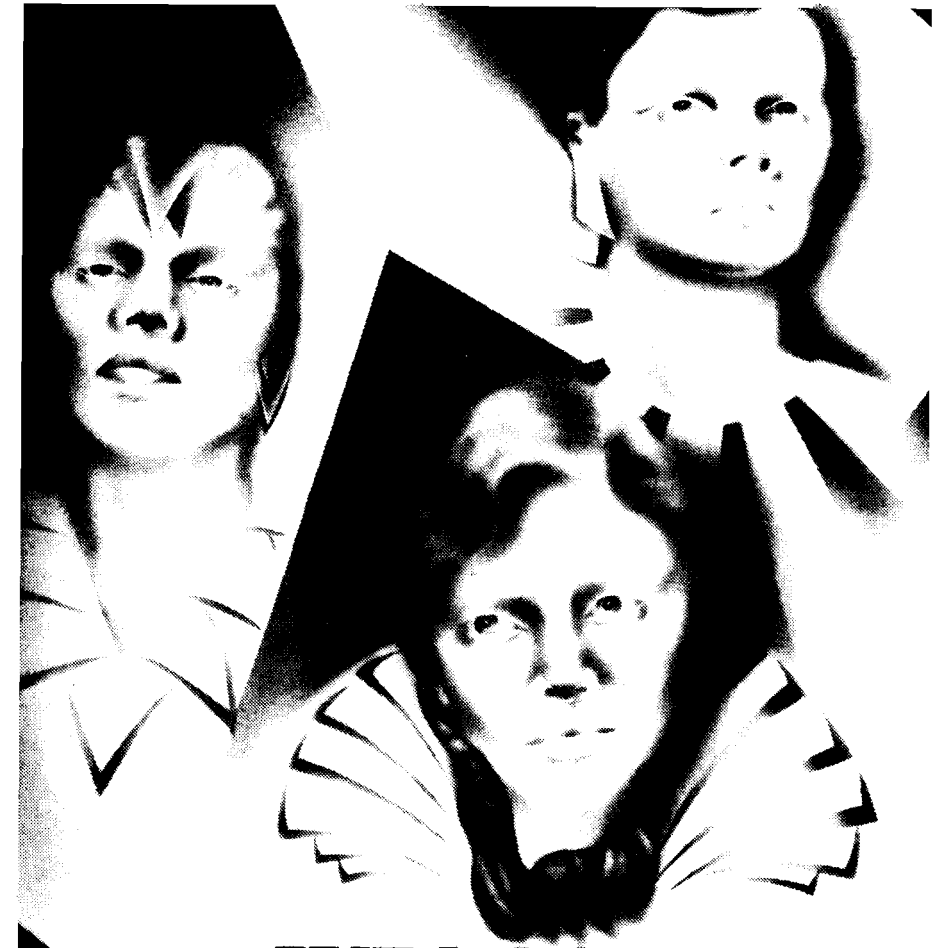

THE LAST ONE TO KNOW

by Deborah Wessell

Deborah Wessell is a freelance business writer in Seattle, and a graduate of Clarion West '88. Her fiction has appeared in *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night*, the compendium of dreadful opening lines; *The Seattle Weekly*; and *The Seattle Review*. The following tale is her first to appear in *IAsfm*.

art: Halina Malicka

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Friday night over drinks at the public library, Eve and Natalie got up the nerve to leave their wife. Eve felt pretty bad about it.

"It's not that I don't love her," she said, for the fifth time since midnight.

"Of course not!" Natalie chorused in her leading-lady voice. "I love her too."

"It's just that she doesn't understand—"

"She doesn't even *try*. Two years of marriage and she's given up. Want a refill?" Natalie waved theatrically and Nick the librarian ambled down to their bend of the bar with a decanter. "You're married, aren't you, Nick?"

"Nine years," he said, pouring. "Ever since the Library Board got a liquor license, to help out the book budget. I got a nice raise."

"Is your wife pretty contented? I mean, he doesn't talk about quitting the union and getting an outside job?"

Eve rolled her eyes. Once Natalie got toasted she'd ask anybody anything. It was so embarrassing. But Nick just smiled and pulled a pad of request forms out of his apron. The luminous paper glowed green against the rosewood bar. It was a classy library, no need to brighten the lights to take notes.

"Sounds like you ladies could use a little research." Nick's voice was cozy. "There's a new text on trialogue dynamics . . ."

But it was no good. They didn't want texts, they wanted action.

"To action!" Natalie hoisted her glass, admiring the amber drops that leapt over the rim and along her extravagantly-pleated sleeve. "To action and amber and divorce!"

"Divorce?" Nick was back with a stack of self-help disks and their bill. He tugged his moustache nervously. "Let's keep it down here, all right? Some of my regulars are union, I don't want any trouble."

Eve looked over her shoulder at the dim reading room, full of music, smoke, and charming old neon sculptures. A mixed party of wives at a nearby table was glowering at Natalie over plates of sushi, but their shop steward seemed to shrug it off. The Wives Union didn't have to get rough much anymore, not with Congress on their side. The husbands within earshot just chuckled and went back to their drinks, sluicing away the work week with jungle juice.

Or maybe bracing themselves to go home. Maybe the happy ones were home already, or at the pizzeria branch libraries that catered to families. Or off frolicking with their lovers. Eve sniffled, remembering Andy, who'd gotten high on bootleg espresso last New Year's and made a pass at Maureen. Romancing Eve's own wife, on her own squash court! You'd think you could trust a fellow tax accountant, but no . . .

"We've already got trouble, Nick," she sighed, thumbing the tab. "But I suppose you hear that all the time."

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"Not from two of my favorite customers, I don't." As he leaned under the bar to boost their white noise for privacy, Eve looked past him to the gilded mirror above the antique card catalog. Even as a murky reflection, Natalie was smashing, every inch the unemployed actress, her four and a half feet of hormonally-platinum hair worn as an ascot with a crepe de chine summer frock, very Paris. Eve herself seemed small and plain in her accountant's coveralls, though her electrostat perm was holding up well. Every indigo strand gently repelled every other, so that the whole mass drifted about her head like seaweed. Maureen hadn't even noticed her perm, that's how bad it had gotten.

"How bad has it gotten?" Nick asked as he straightened up, but Natalie cut in, suddenly soulful.

"Our wife doesn't understand us!" she declaimed, gesturing stage left. "She says we're never home anymore, but whose fault is *that?* It's hardly a home at all! The bonsai are dying, we never even *see* homemade pasta, she stopped building the harpsichord halfway through. Pieces everywhere! And she won't dress decently when lovers visit, not even her *own.* Says she's depressed."

"She *is* depressed," Eve insisted, out of fairness and nostalgia. She missed their tortellini feasts, all the good times they had dating. "It's not Maureen's fault, really. But Natalie and I work hard, we're good providers—well, Nat's between engagements right now, but still . . ."

"Never mind that," said Natalie crisply. "Nick knows we're good providers, he's seen our credit rating. The point is that Maureen isn't honoring the spirit of the contract, and we've decided on divorce."

Eve flinched from the word. Divorce meant gossip, scandal, fees for the state arbitrator. Maureen would be so hurt, no matter what she said now. She had said plenty lately, though. Today at breakfast she'd called Eve a wimp for not making partner at the firm yet, and lambasted Natalie for refusing to do hardware commercials. Eve shifted angrily on her bar stool. They could afford an arbitrator, if it came to that, and Natalie's career could stand some gossip.

"What else can we do?" Natalie was saying.

"You can listen to me." Nick pulled up a stool himself, to signal the other librarians that he was in conference. He set his pad face down on the bar between their drinks and drew a familiar figure on the back.

"A marriage is a triangle," he said. "It's strong and it's stable. Push on one side, the other two sides brace it. It works in geodesic domes, and it works in society. Triangles make strong, stable homes."

The old homilies sounded new, spoken in Nick's deep, reassuring tones. As he went on, Eve felt the tears brimming again. Maybe they owed it to themselves, and to society, to brace up their marriage and help Maureen pull through. She could try harder for a promotion, and Natalie was

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bound to get her big break sooner or later. Then they could apply for kids. They could do it. They could be strong and stable. She put her arm around Natalie's shoulder.

"Garbage!" Natalie snarled. "Compacted, sanitized garbage!"

She stood up, drained Eve's glass, and backed away from the bar. People were staring.

"What about the individual, and the pursuit of happiness?" she challenged Nick. "Eve and I love each other and we want a home, we do our best. But we married too young! We're not right for Maureen, and we all know it! Should the three of us stay together and be miserable for the rest of our lives? Is *that* the price of stability?" Her voice quavered and she gave them a profile.

"Maybe you don't understand the price of divorce, lady!"

It was the shop steward at the sushi table, a lanky, good-looking wife in studded leather who had stayed on alone after the other men and women left. He nodded past Natalie to Eve.

"You and your partner there better think twice about a divorce attempt. The National Marital Relations Board just ruled on that case in Philly. A few tiffs won't cut it. Flagrant breach of contract or you're dead in the water. *And* they upped the arbitration fees again."

Natalie drew herself up grandly. "Now that you're delivered your unsolicited advice, why don't you mind your manners and finish your fish?"

He rose from his chair, planting his fists on the table and leaning toward her.

"Now that you've made a fool of yourself in public," he said slowly, "why don't you go home and live up to your contract?"

Natalie went for him. Eve knocked over a stool trying to stop her, everyone stood up, there was shouting and the sharp sound of a slap. Eve reached Natalie just as Nick bulled his way through the crowd and confronted the wife.

"Out, mister."

"Siding with the homewreckers?" The man touched his face where Natalie's nails had scored it. "You'd better look out for your license."

"Out!" Nick watched him go, then turned to Natalie. Her hair had come loose and she was sobbing, beautifully. Nick sighed. "Down that hallway, ladies."

As he steered them past the onlookers, someone applauded, but Eve didn't look around. She was trembling with excitement and possibilities. Her life was changing *now,* tonight. They were on the brink, but of what?

Nick settled them in his little office, sealed the door, and traced some patterns on the desk screen with a stubby finger. Natalie was still drying her eyes when the screen flickered into print.

"That's what I thought," Nick muttered. He cleared the screen and

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turned to them. "There's an immaturity clause still on the books in this state. You could petition for annulment. How old are you both?"

"Twenty-four," said Eve. "How did you find that out so fast?"

"That's why God made online indexing, honey. Natalie?"

Natalie cleared her throat. "Technically, thirty-one."

"What?" Eve yelped. "I thought you were my age!"

"Well, for my career, I am. Sorry, Evie. What's the clause, Nick? Do we qualify?"

"Eve does, barely. It allows for annulment on the grounds of emotional instability. It's not used much, because of the penalties, and it's a lot easier to bring off if the wife initiates the petition. Any chance of that?"

"Of course there's no chance of that," said Natalie. "She's crazy about us! We'll have to explain that it's for her own good. Now, what penalties?"

"Remarriage prohibited for three years," Nick said flatly. "And you have to maintain a household, to show serious intent. Maureen would be free to remarry or live in a singles home, but you two would have to stay together."

"Of course we want to stay together!" Natalie protested, touching Eve's hand. "But no wife for three years? Who's going to cook, and plan everything, and cheer us up, and—"

"And make it a home?" Nick asked gently. "You'll have to do it yourselves."

"But we both have outside jobs! It's impossible."

"Maybe." Nick turned back to his desk as the intercom chirped. "But it looks like your best bet."

He tapped a button, and a woman's voice said, "We're shorthanded, Nick, if you recall . . ."

"On my way." He smiled at them. "My boss. Why not go home now, and discuss it in the morning? Things get clearer when the sun comes up."

He left them looking at each other.

"I don't see how—" said Natalie.

"We could try—" said Eve. She stood up, squared her shoulders, and began again. "We could try, Nat. You're right, the price of stability is too high for us. I love Maureen, but it's not working. We have to change things now, while we still can."

"But no *wife,*" Natalie moaned. "You know how moody I get, auditioning. Who's going to take care of me?"

"I will. And you'll take care of me. Come on, let's go home."

They waved at Nick on their way out. He was mixing martinis for a couple of genealogists, but paused to give them a thumbs-up. They were almost out the door when a burly woman in furs blocked their path.

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"Darling!" the woman brayed, as she enveloped Natalie in a mink hug. "Darling! You were perfect!"

Natalie recovered her poise almost at once. "Eve, this is Martina Quinn, the holovision producer. I, um, I didn't know you knew me."

"I saw you in that little play last fall, dear, you were awful. You haven't been an ingenue since the age of six. But *tonight!* You were *perfect.* Say you'll audition for me?"

"Yes!" Natalie shook back her hair and glowed. "Yes, of course. What part?"

"The PB in my new series, darling. Didn't you know I was casting?"

"PB?" repeated Eve. Her head hurt, and she wanted fresh air and sleep. It was past four.

"Pivotal bitch," explained Natalie reverently. "You know, the scheming woman who moves the plot along. Martina, do you really think—"

"You have *presence,* darling. Call me tomorrow?"

"Absolutely, thank you. Thank you!"

They shook hands, the furs departed, and Eve tugged Natalie out into the street and flagged down a rickshaw. Natalie climbed aboard and sank into a dreamy monologue that didn't stop as they left the downtown canyons and headed for the domes of their neighborhood on the east side.

"Of all the people to spot me tonight and I had on *just* the right dress . . ."

Eve clamped a scarf over her hair and watched the rickshaw runners sweating and smiling at each other.

"Presence," Natalie murmured. "She said I had presence . . ."

Eve wondered idly if she could make it as a rickshaw runner. She hadn't done a marathon in years, but she still loved distance work.

"I *could* change my hair, but I think it's just distinctive enough without being showy . . ."

Whoever first thought to combine an addiction to runner's high with the spirit of capitalism and the decline in public transportation had been a genius. A single runner, that would be the life.

"I'll have long hours, but you can work in the shopping and cooking, can't you, Evie? And I'll need help with my wardrobe . . ."

A single runner, thought Eve, or a married accountant, with a nice sensible wife to talk to when the actress husband got crazy and self-indulgent. Maureen was so easy to talk to. She'd been a little cross lately, but who wouldn't be, with her husbands out half the night? Eve had been meaning to spend more time at home, anyway.

"You'll deal with the lawyers, won't you, Evie? You're so good at papers and things . . ."

"Natalie!"

"What?"

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"Let's walk the rest of the way."

Eve paid the fare while Natalie unplugged the high heels of her shoes and fretted. "This will just slow us down. My god, it's almost morning!"

It was dawn. The street lights paled as they climbed the hill towards home. A warm wind was ruffling the willows, and Eve watched them as she explained to Natalie that the annulment was off.

"But you said yourself, the marriage isn't working." Natalie's hair curved sideways in the wind.

"We aren't making it work. We'll try harder, all three of us."

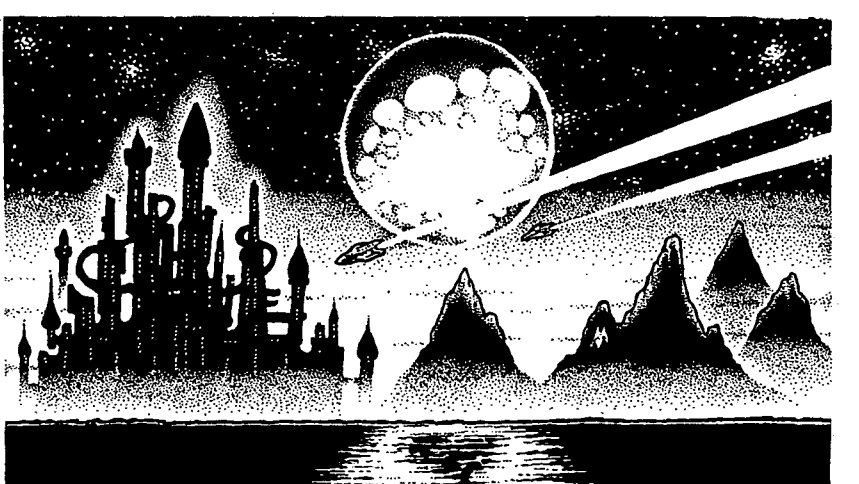
"Maybe you're right." Natalie looked like a star already, rising to the occasion. "I've been so worried about my career, I could hardly think. But now Maureen will be proud of me, and the three of us will have such fun . . ."

They strolled along arm-in-arm, companionably hungover. She *will* be proud, Eve mused. She's a fine wife, and we'll take much better care of her from now on.

They had reached Maureen's lilac hedge before it struck Eve that something was amiss. All the windows in the main dome were irised open, but no lights were on, and someone had left the fountain running. And there was a note tacked to the front door.

Natalie stopped dead. "She couldn't have—"

Eve pushed past her and rushed to the door, stumbling a little, then stood at the threshold with her hands at her sides. The note was caught in a last gust of the night wind, snapping and fluttering, but she didn't have the heart to hold it steady and read the words. ●



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VENUS MORNING/ VENUS EVENING LOVER

Venus from here
Is like a jewel
In the evening air,
Or like an early morning flare,

But not asleep with us:
We dream of love. Her heat is real,
And she is crushed beyond the parlances
Of heat or love by atmospheres
She largely makes herself.

This is lust:
It rises halfway up the sky
Then sinks away and rises up
Again behind you.

Venus lives in us
And by herself,
The early morning god
Of burning passion,
But not with fires of godhead,
Only rich albedo,
Morning fantasies of sex & hell.

—Jack Daw

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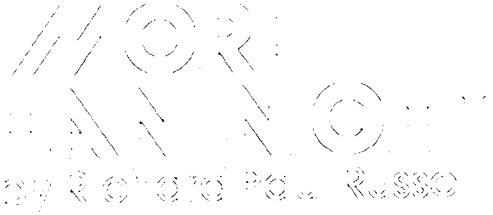

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A heavy rain poured from the night sky. Half a mile away, a building was in flames, the fire undaunted by the rain, sending up clouds of smoke; damp ash drifted in the air.

Mallon ducked into a shallow alcove, the door boarded over, security-sealed. Exhausted, his clothes soaked and water dripping from his hair, he closed his eyes and pressed back against wood and brick so the rain did not touch him. He'd come a long way in a short time, most of it on foot; he hoped it was worth it.

Sleep tried to shut down his mind, his body; concentration was difficult, and he could not hang on to complete threads of thought. An explosion rocked the air, shook the building he leaned against. Mallon opened his eyes, pulling out of a doze. On the street, a grinder roared past, chewing up the surface of the road, spraying rock and dirt to both sides, its armored body almost hidden by damp flying dust; its siren wailed as it passed.

Mallon remained in the alcove a few minutes, resting. When the grinder was long gone—the only sounds now were faint shouts, distant gunfire, the rain falling on stone and water—he stepped out into the street and pushed on.

As he neared the fire, he could see it burning in a number of buildings, perhaps an entire block engulfed in flame on the other side of Track Canal. Just before he reached the canal, Mallon turned down the street, crossed it and stopped in front of a three-story building of charred stone and wood—the survivor of several previous fires. He approached the metal door, rapped on it. A gray panel at eye level shimmered a moment, became almost translucent, then went back to gray. The door opened and Terril, a big man dressed in glass and steel, nodded at Mallon, stepped aside to let him in. Terril closed the door, cutting off the sounds of the streets and rain, then retreated into his cubicle built into the wall.

Mallon walked slowly along the corridor, the way lit by strings of diffuse blue phosphor lights trailing from the ceiling. The building was quiet, but muted voices and other unidentifiable sounds filtered through the doors and walls on both sides. At the end of the corridor he turned to the right and started up a flight of wooden stairs.

The second floor was quieter than the first, the corridor darker, the ceiling higher. Only one door led off from the corridor, near the end. Mallon tapped lightly on the thick wood, and almost immediately the door was opened for him. He stepped inside, and the door was pushed quickly and quietly closed.

The room was large and dark, now lit only by the glow of the raging fire fully visible through the immense open windows in the opposite wall. Standing nearly eight feet tall, in front of the largest windows with their neck membranes fully spread and "watching" the fire with the organic arrays of infra-red receptors, were two chuurkas. A small, thin human

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squatted just behind them, tiny black box implanted at the base of her skull (Mallon thought it was a girl, though he couldn't be certain); the girl adjusted the stands of burning incense at the chuurkas' sides. The incense rose, swirling, and Mallon could see the gill-like folds beneath the neck membranes flutter, guiding the incense into the narrow, slitted openings.

The man who had opened the door for him (Mallon knew his face but not his name) crossed the length of the room to another door in the far side wall, went through it, and Mallon was alone in the room with the two chuurkas and their tender.

The chuurkas did not turn towards him, but Mallon knew they were aware of his presence. Their hearing was intensely acute, their sense of touch even more so; they would have picked up the vibrations of his steps as he climbed the stairs, approached the room, entered. If they turned towards him now, they *would* see him with their small, strangely lidded eyes, but mostly they would "see" him with their spread membranes, sense his body heat, the warmth of his breath.

The room was sparsely furnished—a few cushions scattered about the floor, a small table and chairs near the second door, a cot against the wall in the back corner. Mallon wanted to drop onto the cot, close his eyes, and sleep.

He stepped to one of the windows, looked out at the fire just across the canal. Directly below, the canal flowed slowly past, now empty of boats; reflections of the flames danced across the surface, obscured by the rain striking the water.

Mallon turned to look at the chuurkas, and now he could see the small, flexible air filters attached over nasal slits and mouth. Their skin was dark rust in color, leathery. Their upper limbs, long and spidery, hung limply in front of them; their lower limbs, thick and massive and covered with a mesh of dark leather stitched to something like boots, were slightly bent so their stance appeared awkward, uncomfortable. They stood nearly motionless, the only movement the fluttering of the gills, and the slight shifting of the wide upper membranes.

The side door opened, and the man who'd let him into the room reappeared carrying a large bowl and a ceramic mug, both steaming. He set them on the table, gestured to Mallon. Mallon sat, glanced back at the chuurkas. One of them had turned a section of neck membrane towards him, and it quivered, as though drinking in the heat that rose from the bowl and mug.

The bowl was filled with thick noodles in a dark broth; in the mug was a hot drink with a sweet and spicy aroma. When Mallon started eating, the other man sat in the chair across from him.

"Sykora has been delayed," the man said, voice little more than a

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whisper. "It'll be at least four hours before he arrives, maybe nine or ten. You should stay here."

Mallon nodded, continued eating. The noodles were spongy, flavorless, but the broth had a sharp, meaty taste.

"You look tired," the man said. "You want, you can sleep on the cot there until Sykora comes."

Mallon nodded again. The man got up and left through the side door.

When Mallon finished eating, he got up from the table and crossed the room, circling wide of the chuurkas. He sat on the edge of the cot, took off his boots.

In front of the windows, the chuurkas remained unmoving. Their neck membranes were so fully spread, so thin, that he could see a glow of red and orange through them, the glow delineating the patterned arrays of infra-red receptors embedded within the membrane and linked in clusters to their skulls. At their feet, the young human tender, too, remained motionless, a hand on each of the incense stands. All around them, just across the canal, the fires raged.

Mallon lay back on the cot, closed his eyes, and slept.

Mallon woke to gray light and shadows. Just a few feet away, the two chuurkas stood facing him, the small human tender squatting between them. The tender *was* a girl, dark-skinned, dark-haired, with large eyes that rarely blinked and that seemed to look right through him.

The chuurka on the left made several *chikking* sounds, like the buzzes and clicks of insects. After a moment of silence, the girl, still expressionless, translated, the module at the base of her neck blinking green light.

"Sykora will not be coming." The girl's voice was hollow, distant. "You will go with us alone. We leave tonight, after dark."

Mallon sat up, looking at the two large aliens (Aliens? He supposed he was as much an alien as they, on this world). So Sykora wasn't coming. Did that mean the old man was dead? He knew better than to ask, though it seemed important, and instead just nodded.

"Do I have to stay here until then?"

The chuurka made more *chikking* sounds; the girl spoke again. "No. But return by dusk, no later."

Mallon nodded again. He put on his boots as the chuurkas retreated into the shadows of the rear walls, standing back to back, folding in their neck membranes. Outside, across the canal, the fire was out, and only smoke rose from the charred remains of the buildings. Mallon got up from the cot, went to the door, and left the room.

The streets were crowded, but quieter in the light, the noise more like

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a background murmur—people talking, the scuffle of shoes along the roads and walks, the creaking of pedalcarts, and the gentle hum of the occasional pulsed vehicle working slowly through the crowds. He'd thought it was morning, but it was early afternoon, the overcast not quite burned off by the sun; he'd slept a long time.

Mallon walked along the canal, away from the smoldering ruins of the previous night's fire. He wondered if the chuurkas had arranged it. The odor of charred wood still drifted through the air, a surprisingly clean smell.

A few small boats moved along the canal, most headed upstream. The sight of the boats disoriented him briefly, brought up fragments of emotion and incomplete images of a dream, or dreams, he'd had while sleeping on the cot. Something about being on a boat, a canoe that had somehow transformed into a motor driven launch. And what else? A fire on both sides of the canal, chuurkas moving along the banks on wheeled carts, and a large silver fish keeping pace with the boat just below the surface of the water. There must have been more, but he couldn't remember anything else.

Ahead, the canal temporarily widened where a makeshift set of short docks had been built into the canal wall, with ladders and ramps leading up to the top of the bank. A few small boats were berthed, and on the bank above were tiny shacks and cooking fires, people milling about or seated in front of the fires.

Mallon approached the cluster of shacks, started through them. People nodded at him in silence; Mallon nodded back. Most knew him, and probably would rather not have seen him again. Not because they didn't like him, though most of them didn't, but because they felt he brought disaster with him. He couldn't really blame them.

In front of a small shack near the edge of the canal, seated before a cooking fire and poking at a large fish sizzling in a thick black pan, was a thin, older woman dressed in dark red wrap-around cloth.

"Hello, Rhea," Mallon said.

The older woman nodded without looking up, gestured at a tree stump in front of the fire. "Sit." She poked again at the fish with a wooden stick. Mallon sat, and Rhea turned towards the shack and spoke, raising her voice only slightly. "Katja. Mallon's here. An extra plate, another bottle." She picked up a bottle of rice beer, drank from it, shook it. "Two bottles," she added. Finally she looked at Mallon. "How long have you been back in the city?"

"Since last night."

"You working with chuurkas again?"

"Yes."

Rhea nodded, turned her attention back to the fish. He expected her

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to spit violently into the fire, an old gesture of hers when talking about the chuurkas, but this time she did nothing. *They're using you,* her silence said to him, words she'd spoken aloud several times. *They use all of us.* And she would spit—into the fire, into the canal; and once into his face. Now, her silence said it all again.

Katja appeared in the doorway with the plates, sticks, and bottles. Gray had just begun to streak her long black hair. Mallon tried not to look at her left hand, but his gaze shifted to it anyway, to the stumps of her three severed fingers. As she approached the fire, and he looked into her tensed, expressionless face, he could see the tiny, slashing white streaks in the shadows beneath her eyes, the scars that had never quite cleared away. Mallon breathed deeply, trying to release a growing tightness in his chest.

Katja handed him a plate, a set of sticks, and a warm bottle of rice beer. She gave the same to Rhea, then sat with her own across the fire from Mallon, looking at him.

"It's good to see you again," she said.

Mallon nodded. "You're looking okay, Katja."

She gave a chopped laugh, shook her head. "I look like hell, but it's probably as good as I'll ever look again."

Rhea broke the fish apart in the pan, divided it into their plates. Mallon began eating with the sticks, lifting delicate chunks of the hot, white fish to his mouth, blowing on them, chewing, and swallowing. The fish had practically no flavor.

No one spoke. The sun, low in the sky and slowly sinking, was distorted and colored orange by a thick haze, remnants of the overcast. Maybe he *should* take Rhea's unspoken advice, Mallon thought, forget the chuurkas, quit the current project he'd not yet quite begun. Stay here instead of going back to the room where they waited for him. Or leave the city, return to the mountains and isolation.

No, not this time. *This is it,* Sykora had told him. *They're bringing us in on the big one, the one we've been working for.* Their *big one, whatever the hell it is. Now we find out, I know it.* But Sykora hadn't shown at the building, and maybe he was dead. No way Mallon could back out now.

It was something he'd never been able to explain to Rhea, something even Katja only partially understood—his obsession with the chuurkas, with trying to understand these alien beings, and his intense desire to learn what it was the chuurkas, all of them on different worlds, were after. Now, he no longer tried to explain.

The food and beer were gone; the fire smoldered, wisps of smoke drifting upwards, and the edge of the sun began to disappear behind the low buildings. Katja looked at him, said, "Are you staying here tonight?"

Mallon looked at her, didn't say anything at first. After all this time,

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despite everything, Katja would still take him to her for the night once again. A weakness in her, he thought, and a weakness of his own that he would, in other circumstances, take advantage of it, and of her. Better for both of them that he couldn't stay.

He shook his head, slowly. "No. I have to leave now." He stood, set plate and sticks on the tree stump. "Thanks for the meal."

"Will you be gone long?" Rhea asked, looking not at him but into the glowing coals of the fire pit.

"Maybe," Mallon answered. "I don't know how long."

"Will you survive?" This time the old woman looked up at him, smiled crookedly. "Will you?"

Mallon smiled back, said, "Sure." But when he looked at Katja, *she* wasn't smiling, she wasn't looking at him at all.

The chuurkas were more animated when he returned to the room, neck and head membranes fluttering; the green light on the tender's neck module blinked frantically as the two spoke to one another, but the tender remained silent, without expression.

Then the chuurkas became abruptly silent, turned to him. One began speaking again, and this time the tender, too, turned to him, and translated.

"It is time," she said. "Follow us."

The chuurkas, trailed by the tender, turned and started towards the side door, their gait, like their stance, awkward in appearance, though familiar to him now—a shift of weight to one side, that side's "knee" bent at an odd angle, then the other limb swinging out and forward, planting, ready for the process to begin again. It always seemed that their gait should be loud, noisy, and clumping, but there was a deceptive grace and softness to it, and the chuurkas were actually far quieter than humans as they moved.

Mallon followed them through the side door and into a high-ceilinged corridor lit by infrequent strips of pale red pulselights. The passage continued in a straight line for a while, then angled to the right, ended. Another door was opened, this to a landing outside the building and a stairway leading to the roof. The chuurkas ascended the stairs, followed by their tender, and then Mallon.

On the roof, the chuurkas moved out near the center and stopped, silent. Mallon remained near the edge, looked out over the city—the city was lit by fires, torches, clusters of electric colored lights, strings of massive pulsers. The noise had increased again with the darkness, and he could hear sporadic gunfire in the distance, an occasional explosion.

The city had been in a constant state of unrest for several years now, since the chuurkas had arrived and settled in, appropriating whatever

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city sources they apparently needed for themselves. It had been expected, if not welcomed, a pattern that had been repeated in cities on half a dozen other worlds over the past few decades, ever since first contact had been made with the chuurkas. The fighting, the disturbances and occasional riots which had become a regular part of life in the city, almost never involved the chuurkas themselves, but took place between those people who worked with or for the chuurkas, and those who worked against them. And after all these years, still no one knew what it was the chuurkas wanted, or what they seemed to be pursuing. Mallon hoped he would soon discover it for himself.

Someone tugged at his arm, and he turned to see the tender's wide eyes gazing up at him. He shuddered at their complete emptiness, an emptiness suggesting that no mind existed behind them any longer. The young girl gestured towards the two chuurkas, who were quietly talking to one another. They faced the east, membranes fully spread again.

Pale lights appeared in the sky, blinking green and blue, approaching. A few moments later, the sound of the driftship reached them, a fluttering pulse laced with a hollow whine. As the driftship approached, its size became clearer, growing, and Mallon backed away, closer to the roof's edge, though he knew the vehicle would not land.

The driftship swerved around them, banking in towards the roof; the lights darkened a moment, a crumping sound (implosion?) shuddered the air, caused a popping in Mallon's ears. The driftship halted, hovered motionless above the roof, lights blinking again.

Four large, basket-like bundles dropped from the ship, each connected to a lifeline. The two chuurkas and the tender each climbed into a basket, leaving one empty for Mallon. He approached the basket, stepped over the rim and settled into the flexible seat that adjusted to his body.

As the nearly solid gel-foam poured out from the basket's walls, began to encase him, Mallon fought down the panic, the fear of being unable to breathe, that struck him each time he boarded a chuurka driftship. Light faded as the foam rose over his face, then he closed his mouth, his eyes. As sleep (unconsciousness? induced coma? death?) overtook him, his last sensation was the abrupt ascent as he and the basket retracted into the ship.

When he came to, the last of the gel-foam was receding, melting away from his legs and feet. The ship and baskets were gone, and Mallon was propped against a rock, slightly groggy. It was still dark, still night, but there was no way to know how long the trip had taken, nor how far they'd traveled, and the chuurkas wouldn't tell him anything if he asked. They were outside the city, though, that much was clear—no buildings in sight, no lights, no sounds.

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A few feet away, the two chuurkas were bent over the tender. Mallon approached, circled around them so he could see the tender. The girl's eyes were closed, and the two chuurkas were running their upper limbs across her body, prodding, pulling, checking the module at her neck. Mallon knelt beside the girl, put his fingers to her throat. There was still a pulse, and when he watched closely, he could see her chest rise and fall.

The chuurkas stood, spoke with each other for a minute (the girl's module blinked steadily, but she didn't speak, didn't move at all), then they began walking away, headed up a gentle slope of rock and dirt.

"What about the girl?" Mallon called, knowing the chuurkas wouldn't answer, wouldn't even turn around to him in response. They would leave her behind, let her die, whatever.

Mallon picked up the girl—she was small and light—draped her over his shoulder, stood. The chuurkas were nearing the top of the rise, and Mallon started up after them, in no hurry. They needed him, they wouldn't leave him behind as they had the girl; if they got too far ahead, he would stop, and wait for them to come back to him.

The ground was uneven, rocky, but the sky was clear and there was enough light from the stars to make his way without stumbling. The girl was so light he hardly noticed her, and she didn't hinder his progress up the slope.

At the top of the rise he stopped, looked down the far slope which led into a small valley; the descent would be steeper. Ahead and below, the chuurkas wound their way downhill through rock and squat bushes. Mallon thought he could see the outlines of a large, low, dark building at the base of the slope. No light emerged from it, no light reflected from its surfaces—it was a darker, blacker form against the lesser darkness of the valley floor. Mallon gently shifted the girl to his other shoulder and started down.

The chuurkas waited for him at the bottom of the slope in front of the low structure. As he reached them, a wall panel slid quietly aside, and they all went through the opening, the panel sliding shut behind them and bringing darkness as they stopped in front of another wall. After a few moments another panel slid open, letting in light, and they stepped into the building.

Inside, lit by patterned webs of glowing red overhead lights, a maze of corridors branched and curved in all directions away from them. A constant, faint hissing sound glided along the walls. Mallon, still carrying the girl, followed the two chuurkas into one of the corridors.

Though the walls were metal and smooth, the floor was of earth and rock, uneven beneath his feet. The chuurkas walked more quickly now, large limbs swinging, feet planting solidly and quietly, and Mallon had

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to strain to keep up. They shifted frequently from one corridor to another, and it wasn't long before Mallon felt completely lost, disoriented.

As they continued, Mallon began to realize that the building was enormous, probably built into and under the slopes of the valley. Occasionally they passed open chambers of different sizes, and inside some of them were other chuurkas, most working in near darkness. Once, they passed a trio of chuurkas in the corridor, the three linked to one another by cables implanted in their spines.

The two chuurkas stopped in front of what appeared to be a blank wall, and one ran its long fingers across a strip of metal that changed color at the chuurka's touch—from steel-blue to deep amber. A wide door slid aside, and they passed through it into another passage, this one short, ending abruptly at the top of a stairway hewn from solid rock. Without a pause, they descended.

The steps were uneven, and their height made the descent awkward for Mallon, especially with the girl over his shoulder. The chuurkas, though, were completely at ease, their movements smooth and graceful, almost gliding down the steps. The stairs curved gradually, then ended at a doorway that opened out into a room.

The room was enormous, a cavernous chamber filled with dark metal machinery, pulsing red light, a quiet thrum punctuated by loud clicking sounds, and clouds of swirling incense. A dozen chuurkas were in the chamber, working at the machinery, and several tenders moved among them, adjusting the incense burners, replenishing them. The ceiling, at least thirty or forty feet above, was barely visible through the clouds of incense that collected just beneath it.

One chuurka, larger and darker than the others, legs and trunk wrapped in a mesh of black leather dotted with tiny pouches, approached, trailed by a tender. The tender was a thin, full-grown woman who limped on a left leg distinctly shorter than the right. Mallon could see that her left arm, too, was shorter than the other. Even the left side of her face was somewhat deformed, the facial muscles tight and twisted, and her left eye was dull, clouded over.

The larger chuurka spoke, the two who had brought him here responded, and the three conversed for several minutes, producing a constant buzz of *chikking* sounds. Finally they stopped, the larger chuurka made a few more sounds, and the woman tender turned to Mallon, looked at him with her one good eye.

"Put the girl down," she said. "If she is still alive she will be recovered, cared for. You/we have other concerns now."

Mallon nodded, gently laid the girl on the ground at his feet; with the chuurkas, there was nothing more he could do. The three chuurkas and the woman tender started across the chamber, and Mallon followed.

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They moved slowly through the rising, shifting columns of incense, past vibrating machinery and banks of glowing pale lights, mostly red and amber. The incense made him lightheaded, slightly nauseated, and Mallon tried to restrict his breathing to the pockets of fresh air between the burners.

A large section of the far corner was partitioned off from the rest of the chamber by fifteen-foot-high rock barriers with only a single opening. As the chuurkas and then the tender passed through the opening, a crackle of electricity sounded and flashed in sparks around them. Mallon hesitated, started forward, but felt only a slight tingling along his skin as he stepped through.

Inside was darker, though a pale glow from the rest of the chamber leaked over the walls. Rising from the floor in the center was a tall, skeletal structure of metal and cables, something like a cage. Some of the cables curved down into the floor, while others snaked across the floor to a wall of more machinery. The two chuurkas who had brought him from the city approached the banks of machinery, began working at them. Panels of colored lights blinked on, monitors and displays of strange, oscillating glows came to life, a deep thrum shook the air; the cage-like structure began to vibrate, pulse with a pale glow.

The large, dark chuurka stood alone near the cage structure, turned to Mallon, spoke with the *chikking* sounds.

"Are you ready?" the woman tender translated.

"I don't know," Mallon answered, confused. "Am I?"

More sounds, then the woman speaking again. "No, of course not." She crossed to a set of plasteel cabinets, opened one and took out a shock suit; she carried it to Mallon, handed it to him. The chuurka resumed speaking, and the tender resumed translating.

"Put on the suit, you'll need it for protection from the fall," she said.

What fall? Mallon wanted to ask, but knew not to. The shock suit was light, the exterior lined with pockets along the trunk and all limbs; as he fit his legs and arms into it, sealed it along the seam from crotch to neck, the suit tightened, adjusted to his body. It was relatively thin as well as light, not at all bulky, but he knew it provided an astounding amount of protection. He walked around the floor, getting used to the suit, moved arms and legs, flexed elbows and knees, turned and twisted. The suit didn't impede his movement, and the snugness, the support, gave him the sensation of better body control, quicker reflexes, a bit more strength. He'd worn shock suits twice before when working for the chuurkas, and they always felt this way to him. Psychological? Hard to know. Though intended for humans, the shock suits had been designed and manufactured by the chuurkas, so who could know what was built into them?

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"You will wear the helmet during transport," the woman said. She held a helmet out to him, and he took it. As he listened to her speak, Mallon could almost block out the chuurka's sounds, could almost make himself believe the woman was speaking of her own volition, with words that originated in her own personal thoughts; he wondered if she had any now. "When you arrive, you will set the helmet's beacon, then hide it well. The suit is linked to it, will guide you back to your arrival/departure point."

Mallon located the beacon switch, turned it on, then off. There was no seal on the helmet, no way to attach it to the suit, so it would be worn loose; he held the helmet at his side.

He listened carefully to the woman tender, knowing he would get information in bits and pieces, not necessarily in the most logical sequence, and knowing that they would not answer any questions.

"You will have forty-two hours after arrival before the shiftportal reappears for your return. We can maintain it only for ten to twelve minutes, and if you do not come through it, we will try once more an hour later. If you still do not come through, you will not have another chance."

The chuurka, and the woman, paused a long time. Then the chuurka moved across the floor to the other two, spoke with them for a few minutes; the woman tender remained motionless, staring vacantly at Mallon. The chuurka returned, began a new string of *chikking* sounds, and the woman resumed speaking.

"The shiftportal will take you to a place. Where it is, on what world, we do not know. That is what we want you to learn for us. You will arrive inside a vast cavern, you will need to find a way to the outside, photograph the stars at night, do spectral analysis of the sun in the day, make other measurements as we request, bring all that information back to us. Or. Find some artifact, document, some remnant of this alien civilization that would indicate where in this galaxy this world lies."

What alien civilization? Mallon wondered. Don't bother asking.

"The shiftportal will materialize within the cavern, but not within solid matter. We have little control over the height, so there will be a fall. Perhaps only half a meter, perhaps several. Note the height, because you will need to reach it to return. Simply pass through, you will return here."

The more that was explained to him, the more risky and uncertain the whole thing became. Typical.

"There may be others in the cavern, also searching. You must eliminate them, they are working for rival . . ." Here the tender stopped, her neck module apparently unable to translate—it blinked red now. The chuurka tried several new bursts of sound before the module blinked green again

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and the woman resumed. ". . . rival sects. They will try to eliminate you as well. Do not hesitate."

Others. Humans? Chuurkas? Both?

"In the shock suit, and in the backpack you will carry, will be all necessary equipment, weapons, instrumentation, food, tools. We will show you how to operate all items."

A hollow pop sounded, followed by crisp, loud snapping sounds, interrupting chuurka and tender. A bright globe of white light appeared behind the chuurka, throwing the chuurka into silhouette, and Mallon stepped to the side to see a brilliant shimmering form pulsing within the cage. It hung in the air, undulating like a translucent, flexible mirror of light (Mallon thought he saw brief glimpses of his own reflection twisting and fading within it). The object (was it solid?) hovered a foot above the ground, twisting inside the cage; it was about five feet high, maybe three feet at its widest when, in its twisting, it momentarily flattened.

The chuurka spoke again, and the woman translated. "This is the shiftportal," she said. "It will be fully operational in an hour."

Mallon gazed at the undulating mirror—mirror it still seemed to him, or some strange and alien silver fish caught and, in slow motion, wriggling on its hook. "Simply pass through," the chuurka/tender had said. He had no trouble believing it *could* transport him to another place, another world. Sykora was right, this was what they had been working for.

"An hour," the woman repeated. "Until then, we will go over your equipment, the instruments and your weapons and supplies."

Mallon broke his gaze from the shimmering mirror, turned to face the chuurka, and nodded.

Mallon stood before the cage, gazing at the shiftportal, the undulating and opaque reflecting mirror of white light waiting for him. Had the chuurkas built this themselves, or had they found it, an "artifact" of the alien civilization the chuurka had mentioned? Probably the latter, Mallon thought. It seemed the chuurkas had only limited control over it, and that they had access only to the interior of the cavern, wherever it was; otherwise, why not transport him directly to the world's surface?

The thrumming sound around the cage faded, became a soft, regular purr, and the shiftportal seemed to cease moving. But no, it hadn't stopped, not completely, Mallon realized. It continued to twist, but much more slowly now. As Mallon watched, he *did* see distorted reflections of himself in the mirror, incomplete and insubstantial.

The larger chuurka spoke, and the woman said, "It is operational. It is ready for you."

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Mallon touched his hand to the packet of inhalers strapped to his side; he'd have to pop one as soon as he arrived, then activate another every eight hours to keep his lungs accommodated to the cavern air. He put the helmet on over his head, adjusted the fit and lowered the visor, leaving a narrow open strip for unobstructed breathing. Then he darkened the visor until he could see nothing but the pale shimmer of the mirror within the cage.

The chuurka spoke, the tender said, "Down two more settings. The light will be blinding as you pass through."

Mallon darkened the visor again. The shiftportal was barely visible, a ghost in the night. He started towards it.

As he entered the cage, the glow brightened, and he felt the mirror pulling at him, like a vacuum. Mallon hesitated, forced himself to breathe deeply, slowly, fighting down panic. The fear gradually dissipated, leaking out of him, and he stepped forward again.

He took three more steps, the pull and brightness increasing with each. Then, as he started the next step, he was sucked off his feet, up and into an explosion of swirling white light.

A tremendous pressure enclosed his entire body, compacting him; held him in stasis. No air in his lungs, all squeezed out. The light blazed, even through the darkened visor, and he closed his eyes, yet still saw a glow of white tinged red. His heart was crushed, strangely without pain.

Something struck him, and he felt himself popped out of the pressure and into freedom, out of light and into darkness.

Then he was falling.

Mallon was off balance, disoriented as he fell. He swung his arms out as he dropped, reaching, then a second or two later he hit the ground, feet first, then crumpling to hands and knees.

He was down. In. Somewhere.

Still disoriented, Mallon cleared his visor—the world remained black. He turned to look up, and in the darkness a few feet above him, the mirror hovered, barely moving. Remember the height, he told himself.

The mirror flickered once, twisted violently once, and disappeared. Everything was black again.

Mallon lay without moving, breathing deeply. The air was quite cold, breathable as the chuurkas had said, but something about it did feel, or smell, odd. He pulled off his helmet, snapped one of the inhalers from the packet, put his lips around the opening, and popped it, sucking in the rush of air and chemicals. When it was empty, he clipped it into a refuse pocket, and sat up.

He could see nothing. The sound of trickling water, faint and irregular, came from his left. The ground beneath him was hard and rough—dirt, gravel, stone. Mallon retrieved a small hand light from his hip pocket,

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switched on the narrow beam. All around him was more rock—jagged and dotted with reflecting crystals—and chunks of what looked like concrete, and formed stone, and a long strip of dulled metal. Low, thick patches of vegetation (moss? lichen?) lay across some of the larger rocks, a dark gray-green that was almost black.

Mallon stood, aimed the light further away. The terrain, though uneven and broken by rocks and gullies, was relatively level, seemed to continue without end in all directions as far as the light's beam could reach. No hills, no cavern walls. He turned the light up towards the cavern ceiling, but could see only empty air laced with reflecting dust; far, far above, the light beam seemed to simply disappear into the blackness.

He switched off the light, and with a sharp rock dug a hole in the dirt and gravel, up against a larger rock. He activated the silent, invisible beacon, detached it from the helmet and checked the suit's monitor, then buried the beacon, covering it with a layer of gravel and small stones. Mallon stood again, put the helmet back on, sliding up the visor, and looked around him, now without the light.

It was a strange, oppressive darkness, more than that of night because there were no stars, no clouds carrying traces of the day's light, no glow from city lights, no glow from a moon. Without boundaries—the darkness seemed to go on without end—yet closing in on him as if solid boundaries *were* there, only a few feet away, just beyond his vision. Still, something, somewhere, must have been a source of light, because the blackness was not quite complete. As his eyes adjusted, he *could* see—dark forms against dark forms—three or four feet in front of him.

But where the hell was he supposed to go?

He was reluctant to use the light, remembering what the chuurka had said about others in the cavern prepared to "eliminate" him. Mallon felt his way to the largest rock he'd seen, climbed it (it was only about six feet high); crouching atop it, he switched on the hand light again, swept it slowly in a full circle around him.

There was nothing new to be seen—uneven terrain that appeared to stretch out in all directions without end, clusters of concrete blocks, rocks and boulders of all sizes, tangled webs of twisted metal, all without apparent structure, without apparent pattern. He switched off the light, shifted from crouch to sitting position, legs dangling over the edge.

How the hell was he supposed to find a way out? And was this really a cavern? If so, it was enormous almost beyond his comprehension. He would take the chuurkas at their word for now, but there seemed to be no ceiling above him, no cavern walls anywhere in sight; of course, there was no sky, either. How did the chuurkas know this was even a world somewhere, and not a . . . a what? Some *thing*, some *place* completely

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different from what anyone had ever seen before. Still, there was air, breathable air, so that was something.

Where to go? All directions seemed to be the same. He closed his eyes (why bother? he wondered), listened carefully. There were still no sounds but the distant, faint trickle of water. Water. Why not? Find it, and if it was a stream or river, follow it (up or down?), and maybe it would eventually lead to a way out.

Mallon stood again, slowly turned in a circle, listening, until he was fairly certain of which direction the trickling sounds came from. He started to climb down from the rock when a staccato burst of silent, incredibly bright flashes of light exploded far above, temporarily blinding him. He lost his balance, tumbled from the rock, and as he hit the ground was pummeled by another burst, this time of sound and shock waves, vibrating him violently for a few brief moments.

Just as quickly, the lights and sounds were gone, leaving behind popping afterimages in his vision for a minute or two. Then the sparkling afterimages, too, gradually faded, and the darkness was once again complete.

Mallon got to his feet, looked up at the blackness above him. Nothing. Solid and empty as before. What the hell had done that?

It took several minutes more for his hearing to return to normal. Eventually he could make out the trickling water again, and, glancing occasionally at the blackness above, he started towards it.

He picked his way among large stones and shattered blocks of concrete, walking over sand at times, then gravel, and sometimes over the rock itself. Increasingly he came across twisted networks of jagged metal that had apparently once formed some kind of structures; the metal beams, girders, tubes, and poles that emerged from the ground, or protruded from the concrete, were cold and rough to the touch, pitted.

A new crunching sound began under his boots, and Mallon stopped, knelt, carefully picked up a handful of what felt like tiny bits of glass. He flicked on the hand light for a moment. It *was* glass, or something very much like glass, clear and broken into tiny pieces not much larger than coarse sand. The ground was carpeted with it for several feet in all directions before it gave way once more to gravel and rock. Mallon turned off the light, rose to his feet, and continued on.

He listened for the water, and hiked through the darkness, his mind filled with questions, more questions all the time. Too many, with no answers, and too few guesses. His thoughts became almost chaotic, a jumble of questions and speculations without control or order.

Why didn't the chuurkas come here themselves? Too dangerous here in the cavern? Or maybe the shiftportal itself was dangerous to them.

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Were they sending "expendable" humans, like sending out unmanned, automated exploratory probes to other worlds?

And what was at stake here, what were they after? Alien technology? Why were rival "sects" fighting over it, whatever it was? And this alien civilization, was it extinct? Gone, to some other part of the galaxy? Or still on this world, somewhere. Still in this enormous cavern? Hidden? Dormant?

Why had the chuurkas sent him here with so little knowledge, so little instruction, so little help? And why send him into the middle of nothing, with what seemed like no chance at all to find a way out, if there *was* a way out? Maybe they didn't know much to tell him. And maybe they had no choice over where they sent him.

Questions, and really no answers. And the biggest question of all. What *was* this place? No answer to that, either. Mallon tried to forget all the questions, all the doubts and uncertainties, concentrate on his march through the darkness. That was all he really had now to hang onto, a search for a way out and, he hoped, return.

He had no idea how long he'd been walking when he finally found the stream. Actually, it was hardly even a stream—just a few inches wide, an inch or two deep, twisting and curving through the rocks. Still, it was something, it led somewhere, and Mallon decided to follow it, downstream.

Nothing changed much as he walked on. He saw nothing except more rock, more concrete, more metal, and large stretches of shattered glass, so much in spots that it seemed as if there had once been huge structures built all of glass which now lay in ruins all about him.

The longer Mallon hiked on, the more insane it seemed to him to continue. He was learning nothing, finding nothing, and, as far as he knew, was going nowhere. Maybe he'd be better off dropping the whole thing, lock onto the beacon now and return to it, then wait for the shift-portal to return and take him back.

But that wasn't why he was here, he didn't work with the chuurkas to take the safe way out of everything; he'd never learn what this was all about that way. What could he do, really, but go on? Mallon continued marching, following the stream, picking his way slowly through the ruins.

The stream of water swirled around a stone, poured down into a hole in the ground, and disappeared. Mallon knelt beside the opening and watched the water, his only guide, vanish. Jesus. This whole thing *was* insane.

He stood, listened to see if he could hear more water. Maybe the stream

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reappeared somewhere nearby, and he could pick it up again. He could hear nothing but the trickling of the water at his feet.

Mallon started away from the hole, picked his way back and forth through the rock and metal and glass; he'd make a thorough, patterned search for the reappearance of the stream. He had to find it, or he *would* be better off returning to his arrival point. Without at least the stream for guidance he would be wandering aimlessly through the dark. Or, he thought, he'd have to reverse himself, try following the water *up*stream, to its source.

Mallon stepped around a large, misshapen chunk of fused metal, stopped. The vague form of a motionless, outstretched hand was visible just a foot or two to his left. Mallon stepped closer, and the rest of the body came into dim view, sprawled face-up across a flat rock, immobile, lips frozen in a grimace, eyes open and staring sightlessly at the blackness above. It was Sykora.

Mallon reached out, touched the old man's shoulder. He had known Sykora for years. They had worked together several times for the chuurkas, and they had become friends of a sort. Mallon wondered what had killed him.

Sykora's arm moved, the hand clamped Mallon's wrist, and Sykora pulled himself upright, grabbing at Mallon's head with his other hand, making choking sounds deep in his throat.

Mallon pulled back, twisting away and falling to the ground, but Sykora held on, landed on top of him and grabbed Mallon's hair, wedging his hand inside the helmet.

"Sykora! It's me, Mallon!"

Mallon tried to roll away, throw Sykora off balance. The old man wouldn't shake loose, kept his grip on Mallon's wrist, on Mallon's hair, tried banging Mallon's head against the ground.

"Sykora, don't you recognize me? Jesus!"

Sykora hesitated, lifted Mallon's head, then brought his own face down close and stared into Mallon's eyes.

"Mallon?"

"Yes, *Mallon* for Christ's sake."

The old man continued to stare. "Mallon?" he asked again. "Mallon?"

"Yes."

Sykora pulled his face back, released Mallon's hair and freed his hand from inside Mallon's helmet. "Mallon," he said one more time. "I know you."

"Of course you know me."

Sykora clambered off, stepped back a few feet, sat on the rock where Mallon had found him; his breath was rapid, deep, and harsh. Mallon

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sat up, watching the old man, prepared for another attack. Sykora's feet, Mallon now saw, were bare, and he wore only a light shirt and trousers.

"It's not so clear," Sykora said. "I need . . ." He held out his hand, made squeezing motions. ". . . inhalers," he finally said. "Air is funny here, I can't always . . . think."

Mallon touched the packet on his shock suit, counted the inhalers, made some calculations. He'd pop the last one two hours before he returned; if he held off a half hour on each, he could spare the last. He unclipped one of the inhalers, held it out towards the old man. "Here," he said.

Sykora stared at the inhaler a long time, then shook his head. "No, I can't. Probably too late. I know you. Mallon? Yes. Why are you here?"

"Why are *you?*"

"I'm dreaming. The chuurkas sent me . . . here? Now, dreaming. I'll wake up when the lights come on. The lights will come on in here, but it will still be night."

"What happened to your shock suit? Your boots? You did have them, didn't you?"

Sykora grinned, closed his eyes. "Sure. I got a crazy idea, took off the boots, took off the suit. I don't know where I put them. It's damn cold in here." He began to hug himself.

Mallon didn't know what to do about Sykora. Could he take the old man back through the shiftportal? Maybe, but what was he going to do with him until then? Sykora was a little out of control.

"How long have you been here?" Mallon asked.

Sykora shrugged, opened his eyes, shook his head. "Too long. The air . . ." He didn't finish.

"Sykora, is there a way out of here? Out of this cavern?"

Sykora nodded. "Through the fish-mirror. I couldn't get back to it, something happened, I got . . ." Again he couldn't finish, shrugged.

"No, is there *another* way? To the outside?"

"Maybe. I couldn't find it. Wait until the lights come on, maybe you can find it then, wake up from your dream. *My* dream."

Mallon shook his head. He looked at the inhaler still in his hand, held it out again to Sykora. Maybe it would help, bring some coherence to the old man's rambling, bring him under control. "Here," he said. "Please, Sykora, take it, I can spare it."

This time Sykora took the inhaler. He stared at it for a minute, then threw it at Mallon's head. Mallon instinctively ducked, heard the inhaler clatter on the rocks behind him. The old man sobbed once, then took off running into the darkness; almost immediately, he was gone from sight.

Mallon hesitated a moment, then ran after him, guided by sound—gravel or glass crunching (cutting Sykora's bare feet?); rocks clicking; the oc-

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casional ring of metal; once, the splash of water. Mallon stumbled through the dark, unable to see anything, hand out to keep from crashing into something large and solid; the shock suit protected his shins and knees as he struck smaller rocks and blocks of concrete.

But the sounds grew fainter, more distant—the old man was flying—and within a few minutes faded completely. Mallon came to a halt, listened. He heard nothing but his own harsh breath, and the quiet trickle of water. He remained motionless, resting, and continued to listen. Nothing. Sykora was gone, or holed up nearby, impossible to find.

A low, long moaning sound began, apparently from far away. It slowly, steadily grew louder, rolling through the cavern like a wave, sounding something like a monstrous foghorn. The sound surrounded him, swept over him accompanied by a stiff wind that shook his body, pressed in on him. Then sound and wind drifted past, releasing him, trailing dull echoes that grew fainter, further apart. Then silence again, except for the sound of water.

What was going on in this place?

Mallon remained motionless a while longer, listening again for Sykora, hoping the old man would still be nearby, or inadvertently circling back. Nothing.

He knew he should go back, find the inhaler Sykora threw at him. He might need it later. And he needed to find the water again. Mallon homed in on the sound of the stream, turned, and started walking towards it.

And then, just as Sykora had said—the air remaining dark and black—lights came on, from far away, and from beneath the ground.

The cavern was still dark, but now like a sparsely populated city at night with scattered, wide beams of light rising from the ground like immobile searchlights. Mallon climbed a rock, and could now see, though dimly, quite a ways in all directions.

The lights were far apart from one another, several miles, probably; the closest to him was maybe a mile away or more. But they revealed the vastness of the cavern, or at least hinted at it, which more than ever now seemed to stretch on and on without end as far as he could see, the darkness broken irregularly by one beam of light after another, mile after mile. The beams of light, sometimes broken with shadow, rose at different angles towards the upper reaches, then disappeared, swallowed by the darkness far above—there was still no ceiling to see.

There was enough light now, reflected from stone and metal and glass, for Mallon to make his way, but it definitely *was* still night, as Sykora had said, and all around him were the dark, indistinct forms of the ruins of this place. The looming, immobile shapes and shadows were almost more disconcerting than the total darkness had been.

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These *were* ruins, almost surely, but was this a world? Able to see more, now, there were other possibilities, Mallon thought—the interior of a vast starship; the interior of a self-contained habitat orbiting a planet, a sun, a moon; or something quite incomprehensible.

He climbed down from the rock, started back towards the stream and the rock on which he'd found Sykora. When he reached the hole in the ground through which the stream disappeared, he began to search for the inhaler.

After a while, using the hand light in short bursts, he thought he found the rock where Sykora had lain, and he searched the area more closely. He crawled on hands and knees over the rock and gravel and sprays of shattered glass, looked into crevices, gaps between rocks, felt along ridges of concrete and metal. There was no sign of the inhaler.

Eventually he gave up, returned to the stream. He had a decision to make again, but now there were more options—return to the beacon and wait; follow the water upstream to its source, hoping to find a way out of the cavern; or head for one of the lights shining up from the ground.

An easy decision, really. Mallon turned towards the nearest of the lights, a mile or so away, and started off after it.

It took Mallon more than an hour to reach the light, fifteen minutes to cover the last hundred feet through a jungle of twisted metal, tangled and webbed with broken cable, coils of frayed wire, large shards of broken glass. As he worked his way closer, everything grew steadily brighter; the light rising from below reflected in all directions from the metal and glass, adding and canceling, casting distorted shadows and angled streams of light all about him. Large crystals attached to some of the metal girders reflected prismed colors at him as he moved past.

Mallon climbed onto an enormous block of concrete with metal posts jutting from it, and came to the edge of a large, well-like hole in the ruins, the full blaze of light rising up through it. He kept a foot or so back, lowered the visor, darkened it several settings. Mallon inched towards the edge and looked down.

Thirty or forty feet below him, bright even through the darkened visor, was a huge round disk of light, a gently curved partial globe embedded in a solid black substance. Sprawled across the light, covering less than half its diameter, motionless, was the prone body of a chuurka. The light shone a bright orange through the thin, fully-spread membranes, revealing the complex patterns of dark receptors.

Mallon leaned back and sat, propped against one of the metal posts; he cleared the visor, gazed up at the dark void above, which seemed to swallow all the light rising up from below him.

He felt suddenly very tired, and now he didn't want to move at all any

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more. What was there to do anyway? He thought about making a descent to the light and the body of the chuurka; there were enough hand- and footholds so it shouldn't be too difficult.

Still sitting, he leaned forward, darkened the visor and again looked down at the light and the dead chuurka. There might be something down there, something worth finding, something about the light. Mallon stood, breathed deeply, prepared to descend.

The light went out.

All the lights in the cavern went out, and the blackness, darker than night, returned again.

Vision gone, Mallon lost his balance. He felt himself tipping forward, flung his hands out, struck one of the metal posts and grabbed it. His feet slid across the concrete, went out from under him and he collapsed, but he hung onto the post somehow. He pulled, grabbed it with his other hand, then dragged himself back from the edge.

He remained motionless, holding onto the post with both hands. When he felt secure, he let go with one hand, slid the darkened visor up, then struggled to his feet. He still didn't go anywhere, waited a few minutes for his eyes to readjust to the darkness.

New sounds drifted through the darkness—the crunch of gravel and glass; the clatter of stones; something that sounded like whispers, hushed voices. The sounds faded in and out, seemed to come from two or three directions at once, but were definitely getting closer, converging.

Mallon crouched within the jumble of metal posts, hiding in case they used a light. The sounds continued to come nearer, then several minutes later the footsteps ceased, though the hushed whispers, broken by full voices occasionally, continued. A few moments later a flickering glow appeared about a hundred and fifty, two hundred feet away, a red-orange in color from a source at ground level, hidden by rock. A fire? What would burn here? Or was it something else?

Mallon crept forward, careful with each step to remain quiet, making sure each handhold was secure, his footing solid. The closer he got to the glow, the more it looked as if it did come from a fire. Then he began to smell cooking meat.

Suddenly hungry, his stomach reacted immediately with a hollow pain. He had plenty of food in the suit, but hadn't once thought of eating until now.

He continued moving forward. The shadowed figures of people sitting around the fire (he could see glimpses, now, of actual flames) came into view. Mallon made a wide approach until he found a spot no more than thirty feet away that gave him a full view of the fire and the people around it.

There were seven figures altogether—two women (one very pregnant),

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four men, and a tall, skinny girl naked from the waist up, probably fourteen or fifteen years old; the girl had the look of a chuurka tender, though there was no chuurka in sight. One of the men wore a torn shock suit, the woman who wasn't pregnant wore the sleeveless upper half of another shock suit, and the rest were dressed in worn clothing.

Mallon could hear them talking to each other, sometimes in whispers, more often in low voices. The fire came from the smooth surface of a black metal box, and there was no wood, no apparent fuel, as if the fire were burning the air, or something within the box. A large kettle hung from a tripod over the flames. The people passed a wide-mouthed cylinder among themselves, drinking from it, though they skipped the girl each time it reached that part of the circle.

Mallon heard something behind him. He started to turn, but someone was on him before he could move, one arm around his shoulder and chest and, incredibly, a knife inside the helmet and touching his neck.

"Don't," a harsh voice whispered at him. "Don't . . . do . . . anything."

The man's hand wasn't steady, and Mallon could feel the knife blade make tiny slices in the skin just under his chin. He remained motionless and, despite the crashing of his heart against his chest, spoke to the man in a calm voice.

"You're cutting me," he said.

He felt the blade ease back a bit, but the knife remained in under the helmet collar.

"To . . . your . . . feet," the man hissed.

Mallon rose slowly, the blade nicking skin twice as the man rose with him.

"To the . . . f-f-f-fire." The man made a choking sound, then a sob, and pushed Mallon forward.

Most of those around the fire looked up as Mallon and his captor staggered into the small clearing—the girl didn't, and the pregnant woman glanced quickly at him, then looked away. The man wearing the torn shock suit shook his head, set the cylinder on the ground at his feet.

"Let the man go, Tyrone."

The man's grip on Mallon tightened, and the knife sliced skin once more.

"Tyrone."

Tyrone abruptly released Mallon, jerked the knife away (making one final cut across Mallon's chin), and made another choking sound. "Stick it," he whispered. "Just . . . stick it." He turned to Mallon, glaring at him, held the knife up to his face. Tyrone grabbed the knife blade with his free hand, gripped it tightly, then slowly pulled the blade out of his grip. He opened the hand, which now bled from deep cuts in the palm and fingers (there were a number of scars on the skin), wiped his hand

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across the side of Mallon's helmet and the shoulder of his shock suit. Then Tyrone twisted away and, with a pained sob, ran off into the darkness.

"Your name."

Mallon turned back towards those around the fire. None of them had moved. "Mallon," he said.

The man in the shock suit nodded. "Mallon. New in here, aren't you?"

It seemed such a casual question, but a tightening in his chest warned him that the answer was probably important. He tried not to hesitate too long, thoughts working.

"Not really," he said. "A few days."

The man laughed, then shook his head. "A few days," he said. "Then you've been stranded here."

Mallon breathed very deeply, nodded once. "Yes."

The man didn't say anything at first, head cocked slightly. Then, "You *are* new though. A few days." Shook his head again. "I've been here a few years."

Mallon looked more closely at the man, then at the others. Years? Was it possible?

"My name's Rugger," the man said. "That's Charl." Nodding at the balding man on his left. "Trask." A gesture at the man nearest Mallon, who had to turn to see him, and who looked at him through eyes almost completely closed. "Ashley." The woman on Rugger's right wearing the partial shock suit. "Bollondi." The man next to her. "Lisa." The pregnant woman. "And the girl. We don't know her name. She's a tender, Trask found her beside a dead chuurka about two years ago."

"You!" It was the woman, Ashley, who spoke. She smiled. "I know about you." She nodded slowly, still smiling, but didn't say anything more. Mallon was certain he didn't know her.

"Sit down," Rugger said. "Join us. Maybe you'll join us on a more permanent basis. Tough to make it in here on your own." He waved at a flat stone between Trask and Charl.

Mallon sat, questions surfacing; none he felt comfortable asking, at least not yet.

"You found us at a good time," Rugger said. "Most of us are somewhat lucid, though that's likely to change soon. You've noticed it by now, I imagine. The air."

"Yes," Mallon said, remembering Sykora. "It comes and goes. Sometimes I don't really know what I'm doing."

Rugger nodded. "You'll get used to it after a few weeks, a few months." He picked up the cylinder, sipped at it, passed it to Charl. "If you live that long."

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Charl drank from the cylinder, handed it to Mallon without a word. Mallon passed it to Trask without drinking.

"It helps," Trask said, holding it back out to Mallon. Helps what? Mallon wondered. He shook his head. Trask shrugged, drank, then got up and took it over to Lisa, who still looked away from the fire, away from Mallon, maybe away from all the others.

No one spoke for a long time. Bollondi watched the food cooking in the kettle, stirring it occasionally with a plastic stick. Mallon watched, wondering where the food had come from, wondering how the black box produced the fire. Was the black box a remnant of the alien technology, the kind of thing the chuurkas were looking for?

Next to him, Charl began to visibly tremble, then began pounding his thigh with his fist, each blow accompanied by a stifled gasp. He was staring at the girl, grinding his teeth now, lips pulled back in a grimace.

Charl stood with a hushed cry, seemed to calm down a little. He nodded once, then walked silently around the fire to the girl. He took her hand, tried to pull her to her feet; but Lisa got up, grabbed his hand. She jerked at it, hitting him with her other hand, slapping him across the face and arm until he finally let the girl go.

Charl stood looking at the girl and Lisa, put his hand into his trousers, working at his crotch. He whimpered once and staggered back; then he turned and lurched slowly away into the darkness.

The girl had remained motionless, without expression, and now Lisa sat back down beside her, crying for some reason. Still crying, she gently stroked the girl's hair, and murmured quietly into her ear.

"Food's ready," Bollondi said.

Ashley dragged a pack out from behind her, began removing plastic plates from it. Rugger stood, looking intently at Mallon.

"Let's go talk," Rugger said. "I'm not that hungry." He started walking away from the fire. Mallon got up and followed him.

"Hey, Mr. New Man Mallon," Ashley called after him. "Remember, I know about you."

Mallon looked back at her, but she was busy passing out the plates to the others, and he continued after Rugger.

Rugger stopped about twenty-five or thirty feet from the fire, far enough so their conversation would not be overheard, close enough to keep everyone in sight. He found a low, flat block of concrete, sat. Mallon leaned against another concrete block, but remained standing.

"We all have lucid periods," Rugger said. "Regularly. I just happen to be the lucid one now. And Ashley, though sometimes it's hard to know with her."

"What was she talking about?" Mallon asked. "That she knew about me. I don't know her at all. I'm sure I've never seen her before."

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Rugger smiled. "Probably she meant she knew what *I* know about you. That you were lying. About being stranded." He leaned forward, reached towards Mallon, touched the packet of inhalers. "Only two gone, which means you've been here something under sixteen hours."

Even less, Mallon thought, but he didn't tell Rugger about the inhaler he'd lost. He wondered if he was due to pop another. He didn't want to check the time, though. Not yet. "How long have *you* been here?" he asked.

Rugger's smile faded. "Difficult to know for sure, but I think about four and half years. I was one of the first ones the chuurkas sent here. Of course I don't even know which faction sent me. There appear to be quite a few." He turned to look at the people sitting around the fire. "All of them have been in at least a year, most longer."

Four and a half years? In this place? Jesus. Mallon looked at Rugger, all the questions still rising into his thoughts, and he finally asked the one he could not ignore.

"Is there a way out of here?"

Rugger turned back to him, laughing harshly. "No." He shook his head, still smiling. "I've never seen one. No one I've ever met in all these years has ever found one, or heard of one. This place doesn't end, it just goes on and on, and there's no way out, there's only . . ." He paused, smile gone again. "There's only going *back,* through the portal. And for those of us stranded here, there's not even that."

Was that resentment in Rugger's voice? Mallon would have been surprised if it wasn't. Four and a half years.

"Do you suppose the chuurkas know that?" Mallon asked. "That there's no way out of here?"

"Probably." Rugger shrugged. "Doesn't matter much, not to them, though I'm sure they *would* like to know where in the universe this place exists. But that's not really what they're after."

"What *are* they after, then?"

Rugger gave him a half smile, said nothing for a minute or so. Then, "Maybe you'll find out before you go back. It hasn't happened in a long time, so it's overdue." He didn't say any more.

Overdue. Mallon couldn't ignore it any longer, and he checked the chronometer. It had been almost nine hours now since he'd arrived. He glanced at Rugger, shrugged to himself, then took one of the inhalers, brought it to his mouth, and popped it. Rugger laughed again, quietly.

"Yeah, you keep taking those things," he said. "You get too much of this air, go a little off-line, and you might forget to ever take another, might forget about your beacon, the portal, might forget to go back. It's happened. Almost everything has happened in here." He shook his head. "This damn air, the things it does." He gestured towards the fire. "We

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stick together, because almost always at least one of us, and usually two or three, is lucid at any given time, manages to keep things under control. Even when we're *not* lucid, we usually know enough to recognize those who *are*, and do what they say, even if we don't understand it or want to. Like Tyrone, when I told him to let you go. He wanted to cut your throat, wanted to very badly, but he did what I asked. We all do. Survival instinct, I guess. It's what's kept us alive." He shook his head again. "Though it doesn't always work out. We were better off a while ago." He turned back to Mallon.

"We were living in a good place for a long time, close to two years, I think. It was a cave, not a natural cave, something formed out of rock by machines. It was warm, safe, and secure, close to a brook, near a steady food supply. Everything we needed." Rugger paused, sighed heavily. "One day, I guess we all went crazy together, *no* one was lucid, and we all left, started wandering around. Wandered a long time, a long ways, before one of us came around, Lisa I think, and tried to get us searching for a way back to it." Another pause. "We lost one of us, Cheyenne, don't know what happened to her. Never found her, and never found the cave. We've never been able to find our way back, but we keep searching." Rugger tried to smile, didn't quite manage it, then shrugged.

"I was wondering about the food," Mallon said. "Where do you get it? And you were near a steady supply once?"

Rugger pushed abruptly to his feet, took a step towards Mallon, face tightening. "What the hell do you think I am, a god damn information service? Maybe if you get stranded here yourself, and we meet again, *then* maybe we'll tell you. Maybe. Until then, though, you don't really have to worry about anything like that, do you?" Rugger started pacing back and forth, growing angrier. "And since you *are* going back, I'm not about to give you even the slightest bit of information that might help the chuurkas, nothing that will help those obscene creatures who keep sending more people here, either to quickly die or spend the rest of their lives mostly crazy and wandering through this god-forsaken place, struggling just to survive. No, I'll tell you *nothing!*"

He stopped, pointed back at the fire.

"You see Lisa there? She's been here almost as long as I have. Eight months along, and this is the fifth time she's been pregnant. Three early miscarriages, one other carried to full term. The baby was dead at birth, and this one will be, too. They *all* die here before birth." He paused, took several deep breaths, and appeared to calm down. "Probably better that way. Still, imagine what it does to the women." He slowly shook his head, not looking at Mallon, and sat down again.

"I wonder why they don't come here themselves," Mallon said. "The

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chuurkas. Why they keep sending more humans. If this is so important to them, and it seems to be."

"A few *have* come here," Rugger said. "Pilgrims."

"Pilgrims?"

Rugger nodded, but didn't explain. He shrugged. "They've always been cautious. This place, I think, is more dangerous to them than it is to us. Besides, we're expendable." He looked at Mallon, smiled. "Or haven't you figured that out yet?" He shrugged again, with what was becoming a frequent, exaggerated gesture. "Still, you're working for them yet. We all did at one time. But none of us do any longer." He turned away again and looked at the fire.

They remained there without talking for a long time. Charl reappeared, but refused to eat the food Bollondi offered to him, sat huddled against a rock a few feet back from the fire. Lisa got up, walked over and began slapping him until Ashley said something, then Lisa returned to her seat, and began feeding the girl.

"You didn't bring any cigarettes, did you?" Rugger asked.

"No. I don't smoke."

"Coffee?"

"No. All I've got are the food packets, water, some juice I think. You want any of that?"

Rugger shook his head. The silence between them returned. Mallon still wanted to ask him more questions, but the tension had eased now, and he wanted to keep it that way, so he restrained himself.

Somebody near the fire shouted, and Bollondi threw the kettle of food across the clearing, food and liquid spraying. Trask stood and shook his fist at Bollondi, then Ashley got to her feet and stepped between them. She spoke quietly to each of them, and eventually Trask retreated, picked up the empty kettle and brought it to Bollondi. Bollondi took it, then squatted beside the fire and began cleaning it with gravel.

"You should probably go soon," Rugger said. "Before one or more of the others figure you, realize you're a way out."

"A way out?"

"Sure. Kill you, use your suit monitor to track your beacon, wait for the portal to reappear, go back in your place."

"You don't have to kill me," Mallon said. "I'll take you back to the beacon, all of you, and we can all go back through."

Rugger shook his head. "Doesn't work that way. It's been tried. The portal closes down right after the first one goes through. I've seen it tried with several people holding hands, in a chain. Portal closed down after the first, slicing off the hand of the second where it was holding the first person. She bled to death." He paused. "I've thought a lot about it, when I've been able to. I can think of only one thing that might work to take

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two people through, though I've never seen it tried. There aren't really that many opportunities." He stopped, looked at Mallon, but didn't go on.

"How?" Mallon asked.

"How what?"

"How can two people go through?"

"Oh. Sorry. I don't know for sure, remember. I've thought about it, though. Maybe if one is carrying the other, on his back or in his arms, like that. So it's a single unit going through. But even then, who knows? Who knows anything in this damn place."

"Come back with me, then," Mallon said. "We'll go through together."

Rugger shook his head. "I can't. I can't leave them. We help each other. The chuurkas have abandoned us here, but we can't do that to each other. *I* can't." He smiled. "Besides, I'd probably try to kill you on the way back to the beacon, or while we were waiting for the portal. I'm not going to stay lucid forever, remember? Hell, I'd probably kill you, then forget why, or what I was doing, and miss out on the portal anyway." He shook his head.

"Maybe Lisa," Mallon suggested. "Or one of the others?" But he knew it was a bad suggestion as soon as he made it.

"No," Rugger said. "You'd just better go. Now."

Mallon nodded, pushed away from the concrete. He was reluctant to leave, but he knew he should. "Good-bye, Rugger."

"Good-bye, Mallon." He was looking towards the fire again.

Mallon took a few steps back from Rugger, then turned and started walking away. When he heard the rushed footsteps behind him, he was ready, not at all surprised.

Mallon quickly turned and dropped to a crouch, easily avoiding the oncoming knife in Rugger's hand; he kicked Rugger's legs out from under him, using Rugger's own momentum. Rugger fell to the ground, then Mallon was up and straddling him, pinning Rugger's arms to the gravel. Rugger released the knife, smiling.

"Good," Rugger said. "You didn't trust me, even now." He stopped smiling. "Go now, Mallon. While I'm still being generous. I'll be all right for a while longer, I think."

Mallon clipped the knife to Rugger's shock suit, got up and stood over him for a few moments. Then he nodded and backed quickly away, quiet and cautious. Listening and watching for the others as well as Rugger, he felt his way along, walking backwards, losing sight of first Rugger, then the fire. Finally, when he could no longer hear a thing, he turned and pushed off into the darkness.

It was a half hour, maybe longer, before Mallon felt relatively safe

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again. He had no idea where he was any more, and he didn't really care. He stumbled along, paying little attention to his surroundings. He could be traveling in circles, for all he knew. It didn't seem to matter. If it became necessary, he reminded himself, the beacon would lead him back.

Mallon was tired, depressed. He felt sick when he thought about Rugger and his companions, sick when he tried to imagine how many others like them were stranded here in this endless night, and how many had already died. All of them with no way out.

And for what?

He still didn't know.

For hours he wandered through the dark without direction, without purpose. Once, the lights came on again for a little more than an hour, but the night did not leave, and the rising beams that cut such small sections out of the darkness seemed weak and futile.

He came across several trickles of water, including one that actually could be called a stream—nearly two feet wide, almost a foot deep. He crouched beside the stream (all the lights were out again), switched on the hand light, and directed the beam down through the clear water. Mallon remained there a long time, staring at the water flowing through the light, searching for fish, or insects, or other tiny creatures, any signs of life at all in the water.

But there was nothing.

At seventeen hours inside the cavern (world, habitat, energy globe, whatever), Mallon popped the next inhaler, thinking of what the air could do to him, of what it had done to others—Sykora babbling away, hardly recognizing him; Tyrone gripping the knife blade with his own hand, slicing it deep; Charl trying to take the girl, then lurching off into the darkness.

And then, for the first time since he'd been here in the dark, not quite understanding the connection, he thought of Katja, of the tiny scars below her eyes, of her screams (which he had never heard, but had often imagined) as her fingers had been severed.

After all these months, he still did not know what had happened to her—neither Katja nor Rhea would say a word to him about it. It had to do with the chuurkas, he knew that, but whether the chuurkas had done it to her themselves (why?), or someone else had done it to her as some kind of punishment because she, too, had worked for the chuurkas, he had never known. She worked for them no longer, had pleaded with Mallon to stop, and Rhea would not forgive him when he didn't, though Katja herself apparently did.

But Mallon wasn't so sure he understood it himself any more, and he wondered what the hell he was doing here.

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Mallon sat on the ground, his back against a warped sheet of cold, damp metal, took off his helmet, and held his head in his hands. He didn't move.

Mallon was walking again, still wandering aimlessly, when the sky opened up above him and filled with stars.

He looked up, stunned, and nearly lost his balance. The complete blackness was gone, the ceiling—if there had ever been one—was gone, all replaced by a dazzling night sky filled with brilliant stars shining down on him.

Mallon stared, and stared, turning slowly in place, gazing at the hundreds, thousands of stars above and all around him. It seemed that he was outside, now, nightside on a world with the cleanest, purest atmosphere, the stars almost painfully sharp and clear against the blackest of skies.

It was beautiful, unlike any night sky he'd ever seen. Not one of the stars flickered; their light blazed steadily at him without interference, without filtering, undiminished and untouched. He smiled, wonder and contentment welling in his chest, spreading through him. *This* was something worth coming for.

Coming for. He remembered the chuurkas, and why he was here—almost as an afterthought. Hardly thinking about it, Mallon unclipped the backpack, shrugged it off, laid it on the ground and opened it. In something of a daze, he began removing equipment, emptying the pack and most of the pockets lining his shock suit.

Regularly looking up at the stars, Mallon put the equipment together as the chuurkas had shown him. A few instruments he recognized or understood—still and motion film cameras, radiometers—but most were complete mysteries, and he knew only that they were detectors of some sort. What amazed him was how small some of them were, and how large some of them became when constructed—fan-like arrays of thin, membranous materials; patterned networks of wire; clusters of weaving, flexible projections. Who knew what they detected or measured?

Just as surprising, though they had explained it to him, was how easily and quickly everything was assembled. Most of the equipment, self-powered, assembled automatically, and all Mallon had to do was flip the toggles or switches that set the process in motion.

In just over fifteen minutes, all the equipment was assembled; it took only another five to position everything as indicated on the diagram the chuurkas had included, and then he was ready. Mallon went from apparatus to apparatus, starting each one, watching tiny lights come on, listening to faint clicks and buzzes begin. From now on, everything would operate automatically, and he had nothing to do but watch.

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When Mallon looked up at the sky again, the stars were moving.

The movement was slow and regular, and after a minute or so Mallon realized the stars were rotating, uniformly turning around a point almost directly overhead. Or, he was rotating beneath the stars. It was disorienting at first, and he felt slightly dizzy, legs wobbly; but gradually he grew accustomed to the motion, and his stability returned.

Mallon stood without moving among the machines, the nearly silent instruments laid out on all sides, and gazed up at the stars slowly turning above him. There was no sound anywhere except for the quiet clicks and whirring of the instruments, which he hardly noticed any more, but he thought he could imagine what sounds these stars *would* make as they moved gracefully across the sky—something delicate and elegant, whispers of sound, soft and peaceful. Music of the spheres. An ancient phrase he felt he was only now beginning to understand.

But then the movement of the stars began to gradually, yet noticeably pick up speed. As the stars began to rotate more rapidly overhead, Mallon once again had trouble maintaining his balance and orientation. He staggered, and almost fell. He gave up and sat on the ground, found a place where he could rest his back against a low, slanting rock. Half lying, half sitting, and with the cold, hard feel of stone anchoring him, Mallon continued to watch.

The stars were not really moving *that* quickly, Mallon realized, just enough now so they made a complete circuit every two minutes, like a half-speed sweep of a second hand on conventional watches or clocks. They maintained a steady speed for several minutes, but just as he was becoming almost mesmerized by the regularity, the stars began moving gradually inward with the rotation, becoming a slow motion vortex in the night.

The stars, spiraling slowly inward, collected at the center of the vortex, and a tiny globe of light grew, increasing in size and brightness with each star that joined it.

The globe continued to grow, adding star after star, and continued to brighten. After some time (how long?), the globe was so bright that Mallon dropped the helmet visor over his face, darkened it two settings.

The globe was now the size of a large moon in the sky, spinning slowly, he thought, matching the rotation of the thousands of stars still turning about it and spiraling inward. Every three or four minutes now Mallon darkened his visor another setting until eventually, though the globe remained bright and swelling above him, he could hardly see the stars spinning about it.

When the globe was so large it filled half the sky, and his visor darkened so much he could no longer see the stars around it, the globe of light began to pulse.

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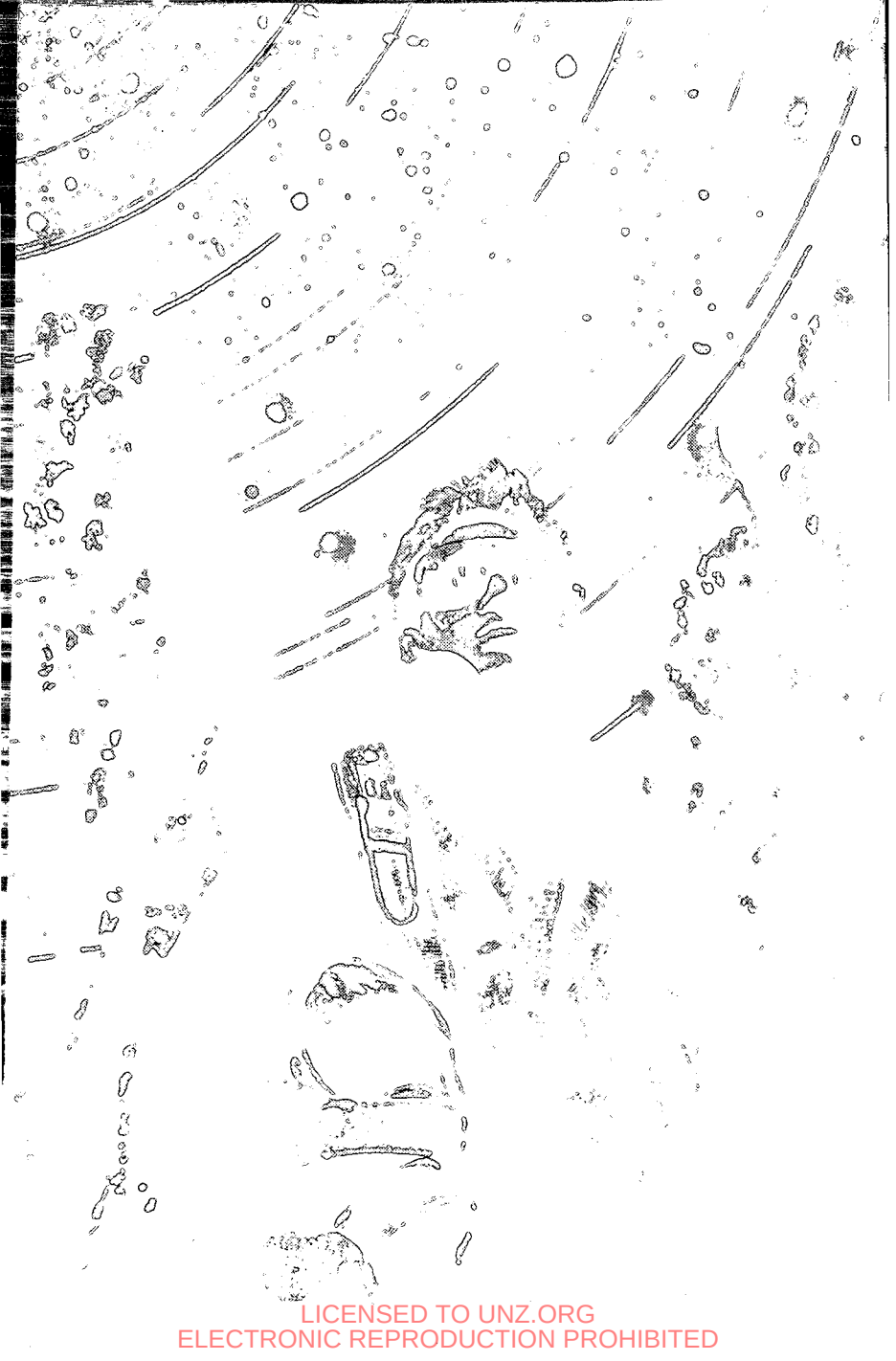

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Mallon felt as well as saw the pulsing of the globe, which he knew should have been impossible. The globe would pulse brighter, and he would feel a pulse of pressure descend upon him; then the glow would pulse back, slightly dimmer, and the pressure would ease.

The globe ceased growing, but continued to pulse above him. Soon, its pulse rate had matched that of his heartbeat, or his heartbeat had matched the pulse of the globe, so that it seemed it was the globe of stars and light itself that kept his heart going, that kept him alive. Mallon remained transfixed, unable to move, and lost all sense of the passage of time. There was nothing now but the steady beat of the brightness and pressure, nothing but the massive globe of light and stars in the middle of solid darkness.

The globe exploded.

The explosion of light burst through the darkened visor, and Mallon instinctively closed his eyes, but his vision remained filled with blazing orange and yellow and red and white. Then the shock wave hit him, impossibly silent, impossibly soon, and crushed him against the rock and gravel, squeezed the air from his lungs. And still there was no sound.

A moment later the pressure abruptly ceased, breath returned to his lungs, and Mallon, as instinctively as he had closed them, opened his eyes.

The sky was in flames.

It was still a night sky, black and completely filled with stars again, motionless once more, but it was laid over by deep red and orange flames blazing as if the fabric of the sky itself were on fire.

Then Mallon realized the sky, the stars, and flames were all pulsing, just as the globe of light had pulsed. He could feel this pulse as well, beating regularly against him, down upon his body, but it was much slower now, the heartbeat of a monstrous, hibernating leviathan.

And the heat struck.

It hit him like a great wind, an incredible heat that should have incinerated him, but somehow didn't burn at all. The heat radiated through him with an intense pain that was strangely welcome, surged through head and limbs without resistance, cleansing his body and purifying it.

Cleansing. Purifying. What was this? he asked himself. Getting mystical?

But that was how it felt, he couldn't deny it, as absurd as it seemed. More than that, he could do nothing to stop it.

Mallon still couldn't move, but now he gave up trying, content to watch and feel what was happening. The heat continued to course through him as the sky blazed through the stars. Maybe, he thought, he was in the heart of a sun.

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That, too, he decided, was absurd.

It began to rain.

A torrent of water poured down upon him, laced with silver and blue flames that hissed and sputtered as they struck the ground, his suit, his visor. The rain fell not from clouds—there were none—but from the blazing flames in the sky, and Mallon began to wonder how much of what he was seeing was *real,* and how much was . . . was *what?* Hallucination? Brought on by what, or whom?

It didn't matter. It was raining, the raindrops wrapped in flickering blue flames, raining from a star-filled night sky that burned with all-encompassing flames and an agonizing heat that did not burn. And it continued, above and all around him, and so it did not matter. It was real. Real enough.

New images rose in his vision, but without blocking or obscuring any of what he was already seeing. There were layers of perception, or layers of reality, somehow all simultaneously visible to him. These new images, though, they had to be coming from within *him,* not from without, for they were very much his own.

. . . Charl pulling at the girl tender, with Lisa, eight months pregnant, hitting and slapping at him, then Charl releasing the girl and lurching off into the darkness, hand at his groin. . . .

. . . Sykora grabbing the inhaler, then throwing it at Mallon, turning and running off into the darkness. . . .

. . . The chuurka sprawled across the curved disk of light at the bottom of a well in the ruins of stone and glass and steel. . . .

. . . Rhea seated before a cooking fire, poking at fish in a large pan, not looking up. . . .

. . . Katja, silent but glaring at Mallon, trickles of blood seeping from a dozen tiny slashes beneath her eyes. . . .

. . . Sykora, in the heat and light of midday, making obscene gestures at three chuurkas crouching in the shade of a lean-to he had built for them, then turning to Mallon and grinning. . . .

. . . Lisa feeding the girl tender, stroking her hair. . . .

. . . Katja again, holding up the stumps of her severed fingers, long before they had healed, cursing Mallon, cursing the chuurkas. . . .

. . . Rhea spitting into his face. . . .

. . . The twisting mirror in the cage, flashing pieces of distorted reflections back at him. . . .

. . . A mob sweeping along a street in the city during a night riot, buildings all around them in flames, arms raised and flailing, hands gripping guns and clubs and bottles. . . .

. . . Rugger gazing silently at the fire coming from a plain black metal

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box, looking at his companions seated around the fire, tiny reflections of flame flickering in his eyes. . . .

. . . And finally, the two chuurkas standing at the windows, the wasted human tender squatting at their side and incense swirling up around them, neck membranes spread and quivering and fully open to the flames of the buildings on fire across the canal. . . .

This last image brought a terrible ache to his chest, an ache of realization, of growing though incomplete understanding, and he wondered how many people had died in that fire, which the chuurkas had almost certainly set themselves just so they could watch those blazing flames, wondered how many people had died in all the other fires the chuurkas had set over the years, how many people had died because of everything the chuurkas did in their pursuit of . . . of what? And he was helping them. Mallon wanted to cry out, but he still could not move except to breathe.

The last image faded, and there were no more, there was nothing now but the star-filled night sky, still in flames. The stars seemed to grow even brighter, the flames seemed to burn more intensely and wildly, and the heat, though it still did not burn him, became even more painful, searing through him, and it all kept on, growing, the stars and the black and the flames and the heat, on, and on, and on. . . .

When Mallon came to, the darkness had returned, and the sky was gone. He wasn't sure that he had ever quite lost consciousness, but there had been some kind of break in his awareness, a gap between the heat of the flaming starry night sky, and the cold of the darkness now all around him, more than night once again with hardly a glimmer of light.

He sat up, then stood, stretched aching muscles. He was exhausted, hardly able to move. He checked the time, saw that he'd been in for almost thirty hours, which meant he was long overdue. He fumbled with the inhalers, pulled one free, and popped it. Maybe that was why he felt so tired, something in the air? No, that wasn't it.

Then Mallon noticed one of the chuurkas' instruments at his feet, and anger rose in him, purging his exhaustion. He kicked the apparatus, sent it clattering over the rocks, scrambled after it and kicked it again. This time when he reached it, he picked up a large rock, swung it with both hands, and smashed the instrument, crumpling metal projections, breaking open the main housing, cracking the glass.

Anger still surging through him, providing renewed energy, Mallon started in on the rest of the machinery. One by one he searched out all the instruments he'd assembled and set up, and attacked them, almost in a frenzy, inflicting as much damage on each of them as he could.

He used large stones, or heavy bars of metal, and smashed the instru-

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ments. He tore the membrane fabrics to shreds, ripped apart the networks of wire, he cracked open the housings, he bent and crushed metal projections, he shattered any glass he could find on them. He pulled or smashed or broke them into as many separate, unusable pieces as he could manage, splitting open film cartridges and other inserts or attachments he couldn't identify. And as he finished destroying each one, he took all the pieces and threw them out into the darkness, scattering them among all the other, much older ruins.

When he could not find another intact instrument, Mallon stopped, stood for a long time in one place, breathing heavily. The anger, the bitterness and despair, slowly leaked out of him. He was tired, tired of everything.

Eyes barely focusing, he checked the time. Ten, eleven hours until he was due to return. It didn't seem to matter much any more, except that he knew he could not stay here; he *had* to get out.

Mallon became distantly aware of an aching hunger and thirst. Mouth dry, he managed to eat enough to stop the pain in his belly, drinking three packets of flavorless juice to wash down the food. Time to go back, he decided. There was nothing else to do here.

Mallon activated the suit monitor, and it picked up the steady signal of the beacon. Without the pack, without any of the instruments the chuurkas had sent with him, he started back, making his way slowly through the darkness.

The journey seemed endless, and Mallon soon lost all sense of time, which seemed appropriate, since he had long since lost all sense of direction. Almost mindlessly, he followed the beacon's signal, paying little attention to his surroundings.

He stumbled over stones and concrete blocks, staggered through gullies, and crawled over massive collections of metal and stone debris, rarely bothering to search for an easier way around. Only the shock suit kept him from being seriously hurt as he occasionally tripped and fell to the ground, or tumbled down short inclines. Each time he fell he got up, studied the monitor, and pushed on.

Mallon crossed several trickling streams, even a large, knee-deep pool he waded through, but no longer checked to see if anything lived in the water. At one point, his route brought him back to the stream he had first followed after he'd entered the cavern, only now he was headed upstream instead of down.

Images of stars and flaming raindrops and the black sky in flames tried to surface in his thoughts, along with all the other images that had appeared laid over the burning sky, but Mallon, not wanting to think about them now, fought them down, kept them from coming into focus.

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Eventually, Mallon staggered into the tiny clearing where he had arrived a day and a half earlier. Was that all? It felt like so much longer. He dropped to his knees, dug up the beacon, and replaced it in his helmet. Time. He checked the chronometer, popped his final inhaler.

Mallon thought about standing, but decided it wasn't worth the effort. He was too damn tired. He set the chronometer to wake him an hour before the shiftportal was due, set a backup, then curled against a large rock, and slept.

He waited for the shiftportal to appear.

Mallon had awakened to the alarm, eaten again, and then, remembering the chuurka's warning, had gathered several large stones and blocks of concrete, stacked them to form a mound that would bring him to the height of the shiftportal. Now, just a few minutes before the shiftportal was to appear, he climbed the mound and stood, waiting.

A crunching sound came from nearby. Mallon dropped to a crouch and turned towards it. He could see nothing in the dark, could not even see the ground below him, but he heard another sound, a footstep, and then a loud whisper.

"Mallon." The voice was familiar.

"Sykora?"

"Yes, it's me."

There were more footsteps, approaching, and then Mallon could see the old man just below him, hand on the largest concrete block. Sykora stared up at him, mouth open.

"Sykora, how did you find me?"

"Waited by the water, where I ran away. Waited a long, long time, left a while, I think, then came back, waited some more, I don't know. I'm okay right now, I think, a little, but I'm still having trouble. Then you came, coming back, you weren't following the river exactly, but I heard you, and I followed, listening, followed your footsteps." He paused, reached up with one hand. "Take me back with you, Mallon. Take me out of here."

"Of course I'll take you back." Mallon reached down, took Sykora's hand, and helped the old man clamber up to the top of the mound beside him.

Sykora was shivering, and Mallon could see bloodstains—some fresh, some dry—on Sykora's clothes, bruises and cuts on his skin, a rash covering his neck and the left side of his face.

"This is a terrible place," Sykora said. "But . . ." He stared into Mallon's eyes, just two or three inches away. "Did you see it?"

Mallon nodded.

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A shudder rolled through the old man, but he smiled, an odd, lopsided expression.

"Listen to me," Mallon said. "We're going to have to do something to get through together. You can't get two people through the shiftportal, not separately, so you're going to have to climb on my back when it comes, all right? Over my shoulder, hang on so we go through as a single unit."

Sykora nodded, cocked his head. "'Sure, okay, you say so, but how do you know this?"

"Met some people who have been stranded here for years," Mallon said. He wasn't going to tell Sykora he didn't know if this would work, or what would happen if it didn't.

Sykora nodded again, and another shudder rolled through him, started a hacking, dry cough; he didn't say anything more.

They waited together in the darkness, neither speaking. Mallon checked the time. The damn thing was late. A sick feeling twisted through him at the thought of being stranded if the shiftportal never appeared.

A flicker of light materialized in the air to their right, at chest level just a foot or so out from the mound. The light grew, hovering, lengthened, flattened out and twisted, and then it was fully there, twisting and shimmering, waiting for them.

"Okay, now climb on," Mallon said, turning his back to Sykora and bending his knees.

But Sykora did not climb onto his back, and Mallon turned to see the old man staring at the shiftportal, motionless, an expression of terror on his face.

"Sykora, for Christ's sake, get on!" Mallon grabbed Sykora by the shoulders, shook him. "Don't zone out now, damn it, let's go!"

But Sykora just shook his head, then pushed away from him. "No," he said, still shaking his head. "No." He turned and scrambled down the rocks to the ground, slapping away Mallon's hand as he reached for him. "No!" he cried out one more time.

Mallon quickly lost sight of him, though he could hear the footsteps running away from him again, just like the first time. He called out to the old man, desperation in his voice, because this time he could not attempt to follow. "Sykora! Sykora, come back, damn it, you'll be stranded! Sykora!"

Mallon looked back at the twisting mirror. How long would it stay? Ten to twelve minutes. Not long enough. Jesus. He turned back to the direction Sykora had taken.

"Sykora! Sykora!"

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There was no answer, there was no longer even the sound of his fleeing steps.

The shiftportal would come back in an hour if he didn't go through it now, that's what they had told him. He could leave, try to find Sykora, then return and go through it the next time, with or without the old man.

But Jesus, what if it *didn't* reappear? He thought of Rugger, of Lisa and Charl and Ashley and all the others, *all* the others—the dozens, hundreds, thousands, perhaps, that he hadn't seen—here for years. How the hell could he take the chance?

He couldn't.

Mallon turned back to the shiftportal, stepped to the edge of the rocks, dropped the visor down over his face and darkened it. He could see nothing but a tiny sliver of twisting light.

"SYKORA!" he called, a final time.

And when there was no answer, he silently cursed the chuurkas one more time, and jumped into the portal.

There was bright light and compacting pressure again, but Mallon hardly noticed it now, and moments later the light and pressure eased, and he was falling forward inside the cage, falling to his hands and knees across a cable snaking across the floor.

He was back.

Mallon didn't move at first, able to see nothing at all. He cleared the visor, then tore off the helmet and tossed it away from him, listening to it clatter across the stone floor. He looked back into the cage, but the twisting, translucent mirror was gone.

The room was brighter than when he'd left, he thought. Mallon struggled to his feet, and a large chuurka, the one who had given him his instructions, quickly stepped up to him, the woman tender at its side The chuurka, with its small, strangely lidded eyes, stared at Mallon, neck membranes fully spread and fluttering slightly. The chuurka made several *chikking* sounds.

"You have seen the Heart," the woman tender said.

It was odd, Mallon thought, how he could hear the capitalization of that word. He returned the chuurka's stare.

"What heart?" he said.

More sounds, then the tender translating. "You *have* seen it, I can sense it in you, I can see it in your eyes."

It was the first time he could remember the chuurka using the word "I" instead of "we." "What heart?" Mallon asked again.

There was a long pause, the chuurka still staring at him. Then it spoke again, followed by the woman tender.

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"The Heart of the Universe."

Mallon didn't reply. Yes, it had to be something like that to them, he thought, *something* worth their worship. Pilgrims, Rugger had said. The final connections clicked, linked with the aching realization back in the cavern.

The chuurka reached out to him, began running spidery fingers across Mallon's shock suit, feeling the empty pockets, sweeping over his back where the pack should have been. Mallon remained motionless for a minute or two, enduring it, then knocked the chuurka's arms aside and backed away.

"Leave me alone," he said. "Don't touch me."

The chuurka made sounds, and the tender spoke.

"Where are the instruments? The detectors? You did set them, yes? When you saw the Heart? Where are they?"

"Gone," Mallon said. "Destroyed. Lost."

There was another long silence, and only now did Mallon notice the other two chuurkas, the two who had brought him here. They, too, were gazing at him, membranes spread wide. Finally the larger chuurka spoke again, making the *chikking* noises that Mallon now found increasingly annoying, and the woman translated.

"You will go back, Mallon. We will give you more instruments, new apparatus, and you will go back."

Mallon shook his head. "No."

"Yes, it will not be dangerous, you have been once, you know it, you will go back through the shiftportal with new instruments, bring back records."

Mallon shook his head once again. "This means so damn much to you, this Heart of yours, go yourselves, and stop sending *us*." He paused, glancing at all three chuurkas, then shook his head one final time. "No, I won't go back there," he said. "I'll never work for any of you again."

Mallon stripped off the shock suit and, heart beginning to pound, went to the cabinet. What would they do to him? Incarcerate him? Force him back through the shiftportal? He latched the suit onto empty hooks, closed the cabinet, then turned back to the chuurkas. He breathed deeply.

"Take me back to the city," he said.

The chuurkas looked at him, but did not respond. Then the larger one turned to the other two, made a long series of the *chikking* sounds. The woman tender did not translate.

The large, dark chuurka turned away from its two companions and, followed by the tender, left the room amid the crackle and sparks of electricity.

"Take me back to the city," Mallon said again.

The other two chuurkas returned to the banks of machinery and

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worked at them for several minutes. One monitor after another went dead, lights went out in clusters, dials stopped moving. When everything had been shut down and not a single light remained, the two chuurkas backed away from the machinery, crossed the room and, not looking once at Mallon, left.

Mallon was alone.

The room was dark now with all the machinery down, the shiftportal mirror gone. He looked at the opening leading out to the main chamber. Was he trapped inside?

Mallon cautiously approached the opening, stopped. He hesitated, then started forward. As before, he felt only a mild tingling across his skin, and he stepped through without resistance, without harm.

The chamber hadn't changed. It was still filled with machinery and clouds of incense, red lights and groaning sounds, and chuurkas working throughout the chamber, all of them busy with the tenders moving among them. Mallon wandered through the chamber, headed slowly towards the entrance, expecting at least one of the chuurkas to stop him, to at least say something to him.

But none of the chuurkas did. Mallon walked among them, walked through the entire chamber, and they all ignored him; not a single chuurka, not a single tender paid any attention to him.

He stopped at the chamber entrance and looked back at the chuurkas and tenders moving about, working at the machinery, talking to one another. Mallon nodded slowly to himself with growing understanding, remembering the chuurkas walking away from the unconscious, useless tender on the hillside.

That's what he had become to them: useless; something to be discarded, ignored. He had told them he would not go back to the cavern, that he would never work for them again, and he realized now that they didn't care. They didn't care about *him* at all.

He stood in the doorway for a long time, watching, almost unwilling to leave before at least one of them took notice of him. None of them did, and Mallon finally turned away from the chamber, stepped to the foot of the stone staircase, and began to climb. ●

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Bloody Murder

Those Who Hunt the Night
By Barbara Hambly
Del Rey, $16.95

"My name is Dom Simon Xavier Christian Morado de la Cadena-Ysidro, and I am what you call a vampire."

Thus is Oxford don James Asher, and the reader, introduced to Ysidro the vampire; considering what follows, it is a dubious pleasure for Asher, but what a treat for the reader!

Have you noticed that our friend the vampire has undergone a mighty change in the past few years? Starting out in literature as monsters (Stoker's *Dracula* is literally not human), they have gone almost too far in the other direction lately—they are victims. And the vampire novel has moved smoothly from supernatural shocker to humanist fantasy—the vampires have become mythical creatures whose adventures in the modern world are not necessarily more horrendous than a surviving Greek god or a modern leprechaun.

Barbara Hambly's *Those Who Hunt the Night* restores the balance quite nicely. *Her* vampires are ladies, gentlemen, and scholars, but they are also nobody you'd want to meet on a dark night, being responsible for tens of thousands of deaths over the length of their varied and often long careers. So Hambly has given us a sort of hybrid supernatural fantasy, with touches of science fiction to boot, since the medical-researcher heroine speculates a viral cause for vampirism.

But this is not the only good thing to be said about the novel. Hambly has had the brilliant idea of setting a full-fledged, murderous mysterious murder mystery among the vampires of Edwardian London, and then carried it off with enormous panache.

Someone is killing the vampire population, which despite its powers is extremely fragile. The most intelligent of the vampires, the above Ysidro (who has survived from Elizabethan times), decides to turn to a human for help and dragoons James Asher, academic and former intelligence agent and player of the Great Game, by threatening Asher's wife. (Ysidro is obviously not a nice person, and yet at the end it is Ysidro's survival one is most concerned about.)

This is one James-dandy of a mystery, and so, true to the reviewer's code, wild vampire bats

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could not force any of the details out of me. Suffice to say that the author plays fair, and the reader can feel very smug if he guesses the identity of the perp only a few pages ahead of the revelation.

To add icing to this well baked cake, Hambly knows and recreates for the reader the details of life in Edwardian London and Paris (historical nit-picking—can the Paris of 1907 be considered "Edwardian"? "Belle Epoque" maybe?), and incorporates them niftily into the story. She certainly managed to surprise *me* with one particular locale in Paris, a city I thought I knew pretty well—somehow I had missed the catacombs of Montrouge, an ossuary containing millions of skeletons from the ancient cemeteries of Paris, dumped there in the nineteenth century (they still exist—I checked).

So, if you want a really crackerjack supernatural, science-fictional, historical, fantastical murder mystery, need I say more?

A Year A Day

Shadows of the White Sun
By Raymond Harris
Ace, $3.50 (paper)

Are you tired of SF that consists of near futures depressingly cyberpunked, bellicose lists of future weaponry loosely disguised as fiction, or relentless studies of aliens that tell you more than you want to know about their nasty habits? Do you long for a little glamour —some glittering imperial court of the far future, where science and decadence mix?

Then you'll like Raymond Harris's *Shadows of the White Sun* for a good part of the way, anyhow He's set his novel in a very far future, and the *creme de la creme* of humanity inhabit a number of orbiting constructs collectively known as the Hypaethra. The inhabitants, for the most part, lead lives rigidly controlled by court ritual; the men duel, the women worry about fashion, and everybody jockeys for position in the hierarchy. It is a technologically knowledgeable society to a degree, but hardly innovative. The ruler of all this is one Volshev, who has been in control for three centuries, and appears only by way of holograms to issue orders and set policy. Opinions vary among the "Revenants," as the members of this society call themselves, as to whether Volshev is a sophisticated computer program, some sort of cyborg, or a true immortal.

The heroine, one Risha Skorb, is a female of comparatively low status (she actually lived on a planet once!) who has worked her way up in court society. She nearly wrecks everything by becoming obsessively enamored of Seren, a handsome young man who is in bad odor with Volshev due to the intriguing of the various noble houses, and who makes matters worse by murdering the head of the clan to which Risha has attached herself.

The murderer flees to the surface of Veii (Venus), which is sort of a

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terraformed incognita. It is inhabited by primitive societies exploited by the Revenants, but run by the Firin, genetically artificial beings who are the only remnants of the solar system's previous regime which was conquered by the Revenants when they returned from wandering the stars.

And Risha, for various complex reasons again to do with court intrigue, gets the thankless task of tracking Seren, and killing him once she finds him.

As we follow Risha's adventures, all sorts of revelations take place. The Firin have retained remnants of the giant artificial intelligence which ran the solar system before being defeated by the Revenants, and hope to revive it.

The cultures of Veii aren't quite as primitive as they appear. Nor, when she finds him, is Seren quite what she thought he was. And it seems that both of them are being used as pawns in a giant game played by Volshev. (And I liked Veii/Venus's peculiar day, which is a year long—instead of seasons, they have mornings, afternoons, twilights, and nights that are months long.)

The story has its ups and downs (as it were), but the surprises keep coming (nothing quite turns out as Risha or the reader expects), and it's a relief to find an attempt at sophistication and exotic color instead of weaponry and whatever the interstellar equivalent of camouflage is.

* * *

Occult Physics

The Eye In the Stone

By Allen L. Wold
Pageant, $3.95 (paper)

Ex-Marine Morgan visits his brother whom he hasn't seen for seven years. When he gets to the small town where his brother lives, Michael is not to be found. His house has been deserted for weeks, he hasn't been to his business, and his employees and friends won't (or can't) provide any information. Even his girlfriend is vague. Tracking down the slimmest of clues, Morgan finds an organized plot to hide his brother's memory, and eventually discovers that Michael has been killed.

Striking a bargain to learn the identity of his brother's killer with the shadowy conspiracy, Morgan is told that it is Dana, the roommate of Michael's girlfriend, and with whom Morgan is in the process of falling in love. And what about Weiss, Michael's paranoid "best friend"? Morgan spends a good deal of time racing from clue to clue, being beaten up, and trying to figure out who are the good guys and who are the bad guys before the mystery of Michael's death is solved—in a thoroughly unexpected way.

Is this a '40s *film noir* with Robert Mitchum as Morgan and the glorious Jane Greer as Dana? Nope. It's a new fantasy novel, *The Eye In the Stone* by Allen L. Wold. The gimmick is that all this noirish activity takes place in a slightly alternate universe (Detroit is the

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movie capitol, California has clean air) where magic is an underground life style.

Morgan is a wizard—a pretty good one—and he has an appealing familiar, a twenty-pound cat (sort of) named Phoebus. So far as Morgan knows, his brother has never had anything to do with magic, and didn't know that Morgan had. But Michael's disappearance reeks of magic. There is definitely a group of the worst sort of magicians in his small town, and even the ambiguous Dana turns out to be magically knowledgeable. And before things get solved, Morgan has been transported to all sorts of strange planes and places (including a universe that's only two hundred eighty feet in diameter).

Wold presents us with no simple or unexplained system of magic. In fact, it's a combination of occultism and physics exhaustively explained in the introductions to each of the novel's sections. It's pretty heavy stuff, and you might find it intrusive or edifying depending on your tolerance for such matters. But the story itself is good fun, with a lot of twists and turns.

Medusa's Sister

Euryale

By Kara Dalkey

Ace, $3.50 (paper)

Rome, just after the Punic Wars have been won, and Carthage has been done in for good. A veiled lady, foreign, is heard verbally abusing the statue of Minerva in a major temple. She is one Domina Euryale, thought to be Greek and known to be well off. A member of the Scipio family visits her in her lavish villa, seeking financial support for a project. She refuses, saying that her money is dedicated to another cause, for which she is consulting as many as she can find of the myriad wise men, witches, and magicians in Rome. The "philosophical" question to which she seeks an answer is how to turn stone into living flesh. She reveals that she has a sister living, and that another sister was brutally murdered by "an adventurer from Argos." Euryale remains veiled throughout the interview; all her servants are blind or vision impaired; and Scipio Hispallus notices the startlingly life-like statue of a young man in her garden as he leaves.

Now even if you don't remember from your *Tanglewood Tales* that Perseus was from Argos, and that gorgon Medusa had two sisters (what *were* their names?), and that the three sisters (oh,yes—Medusa, Sthneno, and Euryale) were transformed into monsters by Minerva (rather spitefully), you begin to catch on at this point to what Kara Dalkey is doing in *Euryale*—the gorgon as heroine!

What's fun about the novel is the clever way the author has managed to, as it were, transform all of the negative aspects of the gorgons into assets. The three sisters were pledged to the goddess Medusa of the Pelasgoi, who were in Greece before the Hellenes. When

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the latter invaded, the human Medusa declared that their goddess was more beautiful than Athena, and the three sisters were as a result changed into monsters by the vengeful goddess.

Euryale, after all this time, has learned to live with her "disabilities" (even the snakes are rather jolly—and what split ends!), but has had the misfortune to fall for a Carthaginian seventy years ago, and in a careless moment, petrified him, hence her search for a "cure." Sthneno has meanwhile settled in India, where she's worshipped as an avatar (of which goddess no one has decided yet) and been given her own temple.

The plot Dalkey has woven around the gorgon's visit to Rome is a little less successful—it's a rather forced business about Scipio Hispallus being blackmailed about his Dionysian wife by an ex-slave, and a Chaldean stoic who falls for Euryale, and is able to look directly at her with the eyes of love. In short, the idea is dandy, but the literary execution falls a bit short—Dalkey is no gorgon Zola.

Dinodiversity

The New Dinosaurs

By Dougal Dixon
Salem House, $19.95

If I had to pick the best SF picture book of the past decade, it would have to be Dougal Dixon's *After Man*, despite the competition of several other lush entries by superb artists. This is because the Dixon book was not only artistically but conceptually creative. He gave us a text and picture book of the animal species which would inherit the Earth after the extinction of man, all superbly illustrated as in classic zoological prints. Each was shown in its environment, with smaller detail paintings and sketches. This was "speculative fiction" carried into the realm of the visual.

Now Dixon has given us another such book, equally handsome and well-conceived. It's called *The New Dinosaurs: An Alternative Evolution*, and here the speculation is off into an alternate Earth which the dinosaurs inherited; those insufferable mammals never got off the ground (as it were), and remained small, insignificant pests.

There is intensive introductory matter which presents the generalities of this other Earth (which is much like ours in geography), including a chart showing the development of the various new species from those of the age of the dinosaurs.

Then there is the major portion of the book, that devoted to text and pictures on individual species, which is divided by habitat. The thesis is that the dinosaurs spread into every ecological niche occupied in *our* world by mammals (sometimes developing fur or feathers in the process), and the dinodiversity is wonderful to behold (and read about).

Most of them are literally indescribable—you have to see the pictures—but among the ones simplest

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to describe are: the sift, a winged, wading dinosaur; the footle, a small arbrosaur (tree-dwelling dinosaur), which looks like an even-more-demented-than-usual road runner; the gimp, an even smaller arbrosaur that lives only on nectar and has the beak to do it; the turtosaur, resembling a cross between a brontosaurus and an armadillo; and the wyrm, a burrowing dinosaur.

There are also some new and exotic mammals and birds, notably the tromble, a ten-foot-high bird which roams in herds on the tundra and looks like a two-footed musk ox.

You may be sated with dinosaurs; certainly, the poor beasties have been overexposed for the past decade—tyrannosaurus T-shirts and dinosaur muffin tins, for heaven's sake. (Come to think of it, why hasn't anyone reprinted *Before the Dawn* by John Taine, the only dino bio ever published?). But even if you are, *The New Dinosaurs* could well stir your jaded palate —Mr. Dixon has invented some fresh flavors in dinosaurs that are irresistible. And (hint to the publisher), the plates would be as intriguing wall decorations as those from Victorian zoological texts were back then.

Weirdsmith

A Rendezvous In Averoigne

By Clark Ashton Smith

Arkham House, $22.95

The work of the third of the "Three Musketeers of Weird Tales," Clark Ashton Smith (the other two being Lovecraft and Howard), is shockingly unavailable, but a new collection, *A Rendezvous In Averoigne*, partially makes up for that with thirty of the short stories, including the great "City of the Singing Flame" (they don't make titles like *that* any more).

Smith was the most sophisticated of the three, being a city boy (San Francisco) and inclined toward the arts (he dabbled in sculpture and painting, wrote and published poetry, and did respectable translations of Baudelaire). One wonders if perhaps it's because of this sophistication that he's the least popular of the three; perhaps the blatant naivete of Howard, and to a lesser degree HPL, is what has made them enduringly popular. Thesis, anyone?

Be that as it may, Smith's short stories (he wrote nothing longer) are still wonderfully readable. They cover the spectrum from what we now call high fantasy through exotic horror to SF—usually combining the subgenres in the eclectic manner of the 1930s. His vocabulary rivals Lovecraft's in its porphyrian splendor ("presiding over a vast verbal apothecarium of piquant savors and precipitates" says the dust jacket) and his roguish anti-heroes and exotic pasts and futures provide a bridge from Lord Dunsany to Jack Vance.

This new and very welcome collection includes stories from his Zothique, Hyberboria, and Atlantis cycles, and also four of the rare

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Averoigne tales (Averoigne being a sinister wood of twelfth-century France), as well as miscellaneous others. It's also, speaking of rare, a very handsome volume.

Shoptalk

Short forms dept . . . Anthologies seems to be coming thick and fast these days, themed and themeless. There's *The Best of Shadows* edited by Charles L. Grant, *Shadows* (for the unintitated) being a series of horror anthologies (Doubleday, $15.95) . . . Vol. VII of the "There Will Be War" series, created by J. E. Pournelle, is trumpetingly entitled *Call To Battle!* and contains stories by Pournelle, Turtledove, Drake, Kipling (Kipling?) et al. (Tor, $3.95, paper) . . . *Haunting Women: Stories of Fear and Fantasy by Women Writers* has a self-explanatory title and is edited by Alan Ryan (Avon, $3.95, paper) . . . Inevitably as the Ripping centenary approaches, we're getting more and more on the first of the modern serial killers. Jack has been a subject for fantasy writers as well as purveyors of horror, and the various views are brought together by Martin H. Greenberg, Charles G. Waugh, and Frank D. McSherry, in *Red Jack*. (DAW, $3.95, paper) . . . What seems like a contradiction in terms has been collected by Tim Sullivan in *Tropical Chills*, steamy horror stories by Wolfe, Bryant, Davidson, Koontz, and others (Avon, $3.95, paper) . . . And an anthology edited by Alan Bard Newcomer is built around a particularly esoteric fantasy concept. It's called *Spell Singers*, which gives you the subject (DAW, $3.50, paper).

One new anthology particularly worthy of note is *Unknown*, edited by Stanley Schmidt. Almost fifty years ago, *Analog* (then *Astounding*) had a sister magazine devoted to fantasy. It was called *Unknown Worlds* and did for American fantasy what *Astounding* did for American SF. One might say that the time was not right for it, and it folded, but its influence is felt today. *Unknown*, the anthology, is devoted to stories from the magazine by such names as Leiber, Pratt, de Camp, Sturgeon, and Kuttner, and lacks only the superb illustrations of Edd Cartier to be a perfect nostalgia trip (Baen, $3.50, paper).

Now-it-can-be-told dept. . . . (As if everybody didn't know). *Venus On the Half Shell* has again been reprinted, for the first time under the name of its true author, Philip José Farmer. Until now it was purportedly by one "Kilgore Trout," who is of course a character from the work of Kurt Vonnegut (Bantam, $3.95, paper).

Sequels and such . . . Pernophiles are having a field day this season. A *new* Dragonbooks from Anne McCaffrey has appeared: *Dragonsdawn* (Del Rey, $18.95) In addition, there is an omnibus volume of the first three Pern books (*Dragonflight, Dragonquest,* and *The White Dragon*) titled *The Dragonriders of Pern* (Del Rey, $14.95) . . . Robert

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Adams' "Castaways in Time" have been cast away through a fifth volume now. It's called *Of Myths and Monsters* (NAL, $3.95, paper) . . . Fans of the vampire bunny rabbit, Bunnicula, can get their fourth fit of the giggles from the fourth Bunnicula book, *Nighty-Nightmare,* by James Howe, now in paperback (Avon Camelot, $2.95, paper).

As to one-author collections, two of particular interest. There's a volume of heretofore uncollected stories by the late, great Alice Sheldon, a/k/a James Tiptree, Jr., *Crown of Stars* (Tor, $18.95) . . . Something called *The Best of John Brunner* needs no further explanation (Del Rey, $3.95, paper).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Isaac Asimov's Magical Worlds of Fantasy #10: Ghosts,* edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh (Signet, $4.50, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., New York, New York 10014. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Charles Sheffield returns to these pages next month with another vivid adventure set in an exotic locale, "The Serpent of Old Nile," a tale of passion and obsession played out against the background of a modern-day Egypt still haunted by the Ancient Egypt of the Pharaohs. **George Alec Effinger** is also on hand for May, returning to the gritty and vividly-realized *milieu* of his popular novel *When Gravity Fails* to take us on a suspenseful tour of some very Mean Streets indeed, in "Marid Changes His Mind"; then **Judith Moffett**—recent winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for Best New Writer of the year—takes us to a colonized Mars of the near future for one of the oddest First Contact stories you're ever likely to read, the wry, witty, and bittersweet "Not Without Honor."

ALSO IN MAY: **Jack McDevitt** takes us to a far world for a fast-moving tale of faith and initiative—and the lack of it—in "Leap of Faith"; new writer **Peni R. Griffin** makes her *IAsfm* debut with an evocative tale of an unsettling encounter with That Old-Time Religion, in "The Goat Man"; **Ronald Anthony Cross** returns after an absense of some years to document the hilarious interstellar hijinks that can be stirred up by "Two Plotting Pods"; new writer **Rory Harper** makes his *IAsfm* debut with a moving tale of the dark side of childhood, in "Monsters, Tearing Off My Face"; new writer **Richard Kadrey** makes *his IAsfm* debut with a fierce and chilling tale of corporate intrigue and backstreet murder, in "The Kill Fix"; and **Marc Laidlaw** returns to escort us to a strange future world populated by ornately-jewelled robots and their enigmatic—and murderous—Maker, in the eerie and lyrical "Kronos." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our jam-packed May issue on sale on your newsstands on April 4, 1989.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Not many con(vention)s till St. Patrick's Day, then the Spring flood. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones). When writing cons, enclose an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

FEBRUARY, 1989

24-26—**ConTemplation.** For info, write: **Box 7242, Columbia, MO 65215.** Or call: **(314) 442-8135** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Columbia MO (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Mercedes (Misty) Lackey, David L. Anderson, T. Messerole, D. Harris, K. Randle.

24-26—**MicroCon, % R. Hunt, 51 Danes Rd., Exeter, Devon. EX4 4LS, UK.** On Exeter Poly campus.

24-26—**Future Science.** U. of KY. campus, Hyatt & Radisson Hotels, Lexington KY. Space emphasis.

MARCH, 1989

3-5—**CaveCon. (502) 586-3366.** Patrick Molloy. Low-key con at Park Mammoth Resort, Park City KY.

3-5—**BayFilk. (415) 528-3172.** Airport Hyatt, Oakland CA. Joe Haldeman, Coulsons. SF folksinging.

10-12—**Lunacon. (201) 696-9655.** Westchester M[illegible]t, Tarrytown NY. Zelazny, Walotsky, Hartwell.

17-19—**Millenicon, Box 636, Dayton OH 45405.** L[illegible]s McM. Bujold, W. A. (Bob) Tucker. Airport Inn.

17-19—**Magnum Opus Con, 4315 Pio Nono Av., Macon GA 31206. (912) 781-6110.** Greenville SC.

17-19—**CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533.** Joel Rosenberg. Seems drifting toward gaming/media.

17-19—**ConGenial, Box 129, Wilmette IL 60091.** M. Lackey, artists Waller & Worley, fan A. Hooper.

24-26—**BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203.** Cherryh, Stiles, Hickman. East Coast's Easter con.

24-26—**MiniCon, Box 8297 Lake Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408.** Harrison, Leiber, Laskowski, F. Dyson.

24-26—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 789-0599** or **272-7320** (24-hr. machine). Big.

24-26—**ConTrivance, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** UK national con, on island of Jersey.

30-Apr. 2—**AggieCon, MSC Box J-1, Texas A & M, College Station TX 77802.** On campus. 20th year.

31-Apr. 2—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (516) 632-6460.** Pohl, Joe Haldeman, N. Kress.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** WorldCon in Boston. $70 to 3/15/89.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $60 to 12/1/88.

28-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $55 until mid-1989.

AUGUST, 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $75 in 1989.

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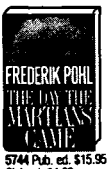

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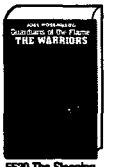

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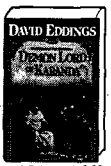

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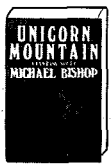

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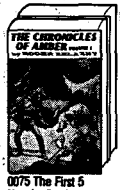

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